THE HORUS HERESY®
PRIMARCHS
XIX
GUY HALEY
CORAX
LORD OF SHADOWS

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PRIMARCHS
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BACKLIST

The Primarchs

VULKAN: LORD OF DRAKES

JAGHATAI KHAN: WARHAWK OF CHOGORIS

FERRUS MANUS: GORGON OF MEDUSA

FULGRIM: THE PALATINE PHOENIX

LORGAR: BEARER OF THE WORD

PERTURABO: THE HAMMER OF OLYMPIA

MAGNUS THE RED: MASTER OF PROSPERO

LEMAN RUSS: THE GREAT WOLF

ROBOUTE GUILLIMAN: LORD OF ULTRAMAR

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THE HORUS HERESY®
PRIMARCHS

GUY HALEY

CORAX

LORD OF SHADOWS

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THE HORUS HERESY

It is a time of legend.

Mighty heroes battle for the right to rule the galaxy. The vast armies of the Emperor of Mankind conquer the stars in a Great Crusade – the myriad alien races are to be smashed by his elite warriors and wiped from the face of history.

The dawn of a new age of supremacy for humanity beckons. Gleaming citadels of marble and gold celebrate the many victories of the Emperor, as system after system is brought back under his control. Triumphs are raised on a million worlds to record the epic deeds of his most powerful champions.

First and foremost amongst these are the primarchs, superhuman beings who have led the Space Marine Legions in campaign after campaign. They are unstoppable and magnificent, the pinnacle of the Emperor's genetic experimentation, while the Space Marines themselves are the mightiest human warriors the galaxy has ever known, each capable of besting a hundred normal men or more in combat.

Many are the tales told of these legendary beings. From the halls of the Imperial Palace on Terra to the outermost reaches of Ultima Segmentum, their deeds are known to be shaping the very future of the galaxy. But can such souls remain free of doubt and corruption forever? Or will the temptation of greater power prove too much for even the most loyal sons of the Emperor?

The seeds of heresy have already been sown, and the start of the greatest war in the history of mankind is but a few years away...

ONE

STRATEGOS

Roboute Guilliman neared his brother’s hiding place. He didn’t need to see him to know it. His brother’s presence prickled the hair on the nape of his neck, the sensation prey felt before the killing bite. Guilliman was wary. He had won, but he could still fall. In the shattered grand concert hall, shadows were everywhere.

His brother was lord of the shadows. This was his kingdom.

Stepping carefully over a pile of bodies oozing life fluids, he aimed the *Arbitrator* upwards, towards the top of a shattered column. Often, his brother attacked from above. Darkness and height defined his ambush technique. There was nothing there. He moved on.

‘Your armies are scattered,’ Guilliman boomed. ‘Your worlds are taken. Your last fortress burns. Do you yield, brother?’

The faintest hiss of air was the only warning Guilliman got of the attack. His brother leapt from a shadowed corner of the broken floor above. Black space took on human shape and dived at him. Guilliman pivoted and leant back to dodge a cruelly curved set of claws aimed at his helm.

‘A perfect decapitation strike!’ Guilliman said admiringly. ‘Narrowly evaded.’

His brother went into a roll and sprang up to his feet. Unlike Guilliman, he was unarmoured, clad in charcoal-black from head to toe, his face smeared with the ashes of his empire. A small chest-plate of ceramite was his only physical defence; the rest came down to stealth and guile. It was a strategy

that had almost worked.

Almost wins no wars.

Guilliman's brother attacked again. The claws mounted on the back of his hand fizzled with disruptive energies. Even in full sight he was hard to see. He moved with such staggering speed his motion blurred.

'Yield! You have lost!' shouted Guilliman. He had no wish to hurt his brother, but his opponent came on regardless.

Claws whistled around the XIII primarch, jabbing one moment, slashing the next, always in motion, presenting a wall of adamantium. Guilliman left his sword sheathed, dodged the blows and retreated, waiting for the right moment to strike.

It was a small window of opportunity, a fraction of a second where the chest-plate was unprotected by either claw. Without conscious thought Guilliman reacted to the opening, punching forward hard.

The *Hand of Dominion* flared with the release of power. Guilliman's brother flew backwards, the chest-plate left broken and smoking by the blow of the power fist. He slammed into the wall, and fell to the rubble covering the ground.

'You are beaten, brother. Yield.'

The figure sprawled on the floor stared up at him, his black eyes unreadable. His body radiated tension as he gathered himself to spring.

Guilliman planted a boot gently upon his shattered breastplate, forcing the other primarch back down.

'Do not attempt to rise. You are beaten,' he said.

The figure relaxed, and sprawled.

'Do you yield?' Guilliman repeated.

The figure considered. The sounds of gunfire outside the grand hall were popping away to nothing. Flights of aircraft screaming through the sky no longer unleashed their ordnance. Black eyes strayed to the dead littering the hall.

The war was over.

'I yield,' said Corvus Corax.

Guilliman smiled. 'Good.' He removed his boot. 'End simulation!' Guilliman called. 'Authority prime.'

A machine answered back.

Voice print acknowledged. Roboute Guilliman, thirteenth primarch, progenitor of Ultramarines Legion. Simulation ending.

The unpleasant electricity of the strategio-simulacra buzzed through the back of Guilliman's skull. Like an ice sculpture melting under a fusion beam, the battlefield dissolved. Segments of cogitator-spun dreams dripped away,

revealing reality behind. There was a moment of disconnect. According to his subjective perceptions, Guilliman was standing and armoured. It took a moment to recognise the recumbent figure lying on the couch next to Corax as himself.

Prepare for reintegration, droned the machine. A necessary warning.

Guilliman's sense of location underwent a dramatic shift. It took an act of will not to open his eyes and draw a drowning man's panicked breath. Corax, who had used the strategio-simulacra fewer times, barely managed to maintain his dignity. His limbs flailed about before stilling.

'Your reaction to the machine is improving. You are becoming accustomed,' said Guilliman. His voice croaked. His extremities tingled. Being immersed did odd things to the body.

Corax opened his eyes. Their complete blackness gave him a faintly alien air.

'I dislike the disconnect, but the cognitive dissonance is lessening,' said Corax. He sat up on the immersion couch and pulled the magnetic cradle from his head. 'Though I see no reason to repeat this exercise. I think now you have the measure of me. There is probably nothing more you can learn from my techniques.'

'You beat me three times,' said Guilliman. 'A feat few have managed.'

'Three from twenty,' said Corax. 'You learn very quickly.' He stretched his arms and grimaced. 'Those were my best strategies. You countered them all.'

Guilliman stood. His limbs too were stiff. 'The strategio-simulacra is an amazing machine. I have never experienced anything so convincing. Our ancestors must have struggled not to lose themselves in these devices, but for all its wonders it does weaken the body.' He held out his hand to his brother. 'It is a marvellous toy, and will be a useful tool, but it is not entirely healthy. If you wish to call an end to our exercise, I am willing.'

'I do. Perhaps it is for the best there are no more examples surviving.' Corax took the offered hand without rancour. Defeat had not embittered him. Guilliman pulled him to his feet.

'I am sure our father's scientists or the tech-lords of Mars will unlock the simulacra's secrets soon enough,' said Guilliman. 'A new age of enlightenment is upon us. The secrets of the ancients will be ours again. One day, maybe every Legion will have its like. If one ignores its drawbacks, we can see that it is kinder to the mind than a hypnomat, and allows the consciousness to interact fully with the lessons, preserving a man's self-determination and therefore allowing faster learning. We must make mistakes in order to learn, after all.'

Corax glanced around at the machine and the silent men tending to its needs.

It was something from the lost Ages of Technology, retrieved by Guilliman on one of his campaigns. In its original format it would probably have been smaller, but the Imperial technologies that had restored it to full function rendered it enormous. Its mechanisms encompassed the room they were in within thick, complicated walls; everything, all the operating stations, connection points, medical devices and the two dozen immersion couches at its centre, were inside the device. Whistling coils and banks of clattering cogitators extended to fill most of the ship's hold where it was kept.

'I would be careful with it. It is good some of the old knowledge was lost. I am sure this false reality holds its own evils.'

'Perhaps,' Guilliman allowed. 'But we are wiser now than before Old Night, and when the Imperium is complete, nothing shall be impossible. Now, perhaps you will join me for further discussion this evening? I have matters to attend to that cannot wait.'

'I have several things to see to myself. Fresh orders from Terra. I must begin preparations to leave.'

'We will be parting ways soon,' said Guilliman regretfully.

Corax nodded. He had a grim little smile. It looked pained. He laughed sincerely enough, but smiling seemed to come hard to him. A side effect of a childhood behind bars, Guilliman thought.

'This evening then, my brother,' said Corax. 'I look forward to it.'

TWO

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF ADRIN

There were so many parties. Aranan Armadon Adrin would not have minded that, but they were so rarely *just* parties. The lengthy run of Salvation was approaching. Over the next three months, between their grinding work shifts, the Kiavahrans would be forced to celebrate Uprising Eve, Atomic Day, Saviour's Day, Compliance Night and the Renewal of the Oath. A lot of business was conducted at receptions in between. Aranan had far too many such events to attend.

The last party he was ever to attend was held at the Museo Kiavahr, a prestigious setting for any event, and a subtle thumbing of the nose at the planet's new Mechanicum masters. Kiavahran politics were all so petty, Aranan thought. He lurked at the edge of things, deliberately avoiding eye contact and watching the tech-guilders attempt to make small talk with their half-human masters. Two things kept them from success. Firstly, the Mechanicum's tech-priests were not given to small talk. Secondly, every guilder face in the room burned with resentment behind their forced smiles.

Still the attendees persisted with speaking to each other, neither side understanding the other, but united briefly in the slow, ritual torture of official socialising. The Kiavahrans were unctuous and insincere. The Mechanicum priests, bizarre cyborgs whose cowls hid minds of diodes and wire, could not help but be calculating. It was not a happy mix. The function paraded Kiavahr's dysfunction for all to see.

'What a disaster,' Aranan said to himself. He swirled his wine around in his

glass and watched the tiny vortex. The drink was weak, and insipidly warm. A familiar voice nearby had him lift his head.

There was Ev Tenn, not four metres away, one of the few men close to his own age at the function. Ev Tenn had been a wild thing, a legend on the social circuit when Aranan was taking his first, faltering steps out from behind his mother's protection. In truth, Ev had been one of his cousin's friends, not his. They had never been close, but Aranan made for him with relief shining from every pore.

'Ev!' he called. 'Ev!'

There was no recognition. Ev didn't look in his direction. 'Ev!' he called again, waving like a fool. He attempted to shove his way past a Mechanicum acolyte the shape of an oven draped in a red robe. Foolishly he expected giving flesh, and banged his elbow painfully on the metal beneath the cloth.

'It's me! Aranan Armadon Adrin, Jenpen's cousin.'

Ev turned from his conversational partner, their dialogue broken by the silent, mutual accord of socialites uninterested in one another. Darting eyes judged, each man silently trying to convince the other that it was he who was the boring one.

'Ah! Yes, I remember. Little Three-A, all grown up,' said Ev as he turned to face Aranan. Aranan hated the nickname. It was a number, reducing him to the status of a thing. Ev had always been cruel. He should have turned away, but there was no one else he shared a connection with. 'How are you? Didn't you inherit your father's office last summer?'

'Don't remind me about it,' said Aranan.

'Well, how are things, eh, Three-A? They don't sound so good.'

Ev placed a comforting hand on his arm. Aranan was too much a Kiavahran to take the gesture at face value – there was intrigue in every twitch of a guilder's body – but he was pathetically grateful all the same.

'Awful,' he said. 'Just awful.' He meant it.

'I see,' said Ev. He made a sympathetic face. 'Bored, eh? You'll get used to it.'

'Will I? Look at all this. Surely,' he said, 'the Mechanicum can see hosting the annual contract exchange in a museum dedicated to the tech-guilds is nothing but a protest at their presence?'

Ev Tenn kept the smile Aranan remembered, though the eyes that glinted above it had bled out their lust for life, and been refilled with a bureaucrat's coldness. 'My dear fellow, the Mechanicum let the tech-guilds hold the reception here. They could stop us. They don't. They are letting us know they see the insult and they don't care. They are telling us that whatever we do is pointless. They have all the power now.' Aranan had little power himself.

Already Ev was looking about the room for a route of escape.

‘They still don’t have all our secrets,’ said Aranan, hating the wheedling tone in his voice.

‘That’s the only thing that’s keeping any of us alive,’ said Ev from the side of his mouth.

Aranan looked sour. ‘It’s ridiculous. The Emperor speaks of enlightenment and the end to superstition, and He sets this coterie of priests over us. We might not have the wisdom of the ancients, but we’re scientists, not witch doctors like they are.’

‘Careful, Aranan, that’s treasonous.’ Ev Tenn smiled at a pretty woman alight with pulsing subdermal implants, and swept a glass from her tray. A little of the old Ev was present in that smile, encouraging Aranan. But the light vanished from Ev’s face as soon as the woman turned away, and Aranan’s heart fell.

‘You’ve changed, Ev.’

Ev’s expression indicated something that was not quite agreement, but nor was it disagreement. Aranan was overplaying his hand.

‘You’ll change too, Aranan. Politics will crush the life right out of you.’ Ev Tenn gripped Aranan’s shoulder firmly and dropped his voice. Sincerity made a brief appearance behind his shell of confidence. ‘Be thankful you had a good run outside all this. You’ve your guild’s honour to think of now rather than your own pleasure.’

Aranan scowled.

‘Chin up now, Three-A. It’s been great to see you. I must be going.’ He uncurled a finger from his glass and pointed across the room. ‘I see that the Hasslian Representative is alone. I intend to get him drunk and harass him into signing a favourable trade deal with my house. If you’ll excuse me, I don’t get a crack at off-worlders often. I have to seize the opportunity when I can. You should too.’

Ev left with a small wave, weaving his way through the red-robed cyborgs and glittering guild masters like a man born to brokering.

Aranan sulked. It wasn’t long until he was wishing he’d taken Ev’s advice and attempted to perform his role, for his introspection was shattered by Deven Terr. The Terr Kir tech-guild had been trying to buy into his father’s interest in whispercutter manufacture for years. With his father dead, it was Aranan’s duty to put Terr off. He had never liked the man.

Aranan lacked the guile to extricate himself from Terr’s company, though to his credit he was too stubborn to be browbeaten. As the conversation droned on and on he kept one eye on the hostesses serving his drinks and the other on the museum chronograph. For Deven Terr he spared hardly a glance.

He resented the chronograph like he resented Terr. It had a face as big as the moon of Lycaeus, covered over in fussy calligraphy and painting which the stylists called ‘naive’, but which to Aranan looked like the work of a child. It was thousands of years old, so they said. He didn’t care a jot. It glowered down at him, ticking off the seconds of his life, chiding him for spending them so poorly. Of course, the clock showed old Kiavahran time. Seeing as the old measure had been supplanted by Imperial reckoning, its display was another snub to the Mechanicum. As far as Aranan was concerned, its judgemental air outweighed its worth as a symbol of defiance. Had it been his decision, he would have smashed it with a hammer.

Terr eventually got the message that Aranan wasn’t going to sign away the family fortune, and left with demands for dinner and business talk at a later date. Aranan made some vague noises about asking his under-secretary to contact Terr’s under-secretary while vowing never to go near the man if he could help it.

When Terr had gone, Aranan hid behind the buffet.

After another excruciating hour the first of the guests began to leave. Departure and arrival at this sort of thing were done in strict order of hierarchy. Now he could leave without causing a scene. Sighing with gratitude, Aranan made his excuses and summoned his grav-car to the front of the building.

Slavery was one of the first Kiavahran institutions to go. He’d had the education in the scholams that said it had to be so. He’d also had a different education at home that said the so-called Saviour forced the guilds to capitulate by murdering four hundred thousand people with atomic charges.

Grand sentiments laced the new constitution. Under the surface, nothing much had changed. Uniformed flunkeys hovered within beckoning distance to indulge the guild masters’ every whim. As Aranan skulked out of the building men and women appeared from hidden rooms to dust off his jacket and drape alien furs about his shoulders. A concierge imperiously held back the line of less-rich citizens waiting to leave until Aranan had gone. Other servants smoothly took the place of the cloakroom attendants to lead him to his jet-black limousine. The car was staggeringly expensive, powered by the same engines that lifted the whispercutters. Any impeller array that could carry ten fully armoured Legiones Astartes in a reasonable approximation of flight had no trouble lifting a groundcar a metre off the ground, even one so large and richly appointed as Aranan’s.

Aranan threw himself gracelessly into the back and flicked a coin at the valet. The man attempted to say something. Aranan pointedly wound up the window to cut his words dead.

Sealed in a private world of luxury, he felt somewhat better.

‘Did you have a pleasant evening, sir?’ His driver’s voice was a little off. Aranan put it down to a cold.

‘No, Raspuc Keev, I did not,’ he said to the tinted glassite screening off the driver’s compartment. The man’s mitre cap was visible as a smoky shape on the far side. Hands moved on the steering wheel. Aranan knew little of his chauffeur beyond this shadow play, and yet he often confided in him. The screen offered a form of anonymity, like the confessional in a cathedrum. ‘When I was younger I used to have so much fun. Not any more,’ Aranan said. ‘No fun for me.’ He tapped the window to emphasise his words.

Fun was before his father had died, leaving him at the tender age of twenty-nine to the mercy of post-compliance politics.

‘I remember when a party was a party,’ Aranan said. ‘A time to drink, and dance, and chase the daughters of the other tech-houses. Now what do I get? Endless supplication to the Mechanicum. That’s what all these receptions and pre-theatre events with their mean glasses of warm wine and tiny little canapés are,’ he growled to himself. ‘I don’t remember the last time I had a meal I had to cut up! I don’t even dare pick up the girls. They’re all spies.’

He threw his hand across the seat backrest and slumped. The vehicle had the capacity to carry eight people in extreme comfort. These days it was always just Aranan. With angry eyes he watched the yellow sodium glare of streetlights slide over the metal of his car, smooth as machine oil. Away from the cultural district the ugly, utilitarian style of Kiavahr asserted itself, depressing him further. ‘I wasn’t made for this. I wasn’t made for business. Let the damn Mechanicum have it all, I say.’

‘If you say so, sir,’ said Keev.

Aranan grunted. He leaned forward and plucked a bottle of Life Water from an inbuilt cooler. It was always a new, sealed bottle, no matter how little of it he had drunk the last time, and he always drank at least some. The measure left in the bottles diminished with each reception he attended. If he kept on, soon he would need two. The clink of ice into the glass raised his mood. The cool burn of alcohol in his throat raised it further.

He said no more to his driver, content to drink and watch the dreary cityscapes of Kiavahr go by. There were perks to being a guilder. His car thrummed down the smooth surfaces of priority traffic lanes past lines of boxy serf cars conveying the workforce to and from their manufactoria. Giant haulers chugged down the wide cargo way dividing public and private lanes, their enormous wheels supporting building-sized trailers. Atop the massive tractor units to the front were tiny pilot blisters housing servitors. The power of their engines set up a brief musical thrumming in the windows of Aranan’s

limo as he sped past each one.

He let his gaze follow the logos on a trailer. Under hazy lighting the red brand mark was a smear, its paint faded away. It didn't matter any longer who made what on Kiavahr. It all belonged to the Mechanicum.

The car peeled off the main expressway into a district of identical storage houses. Criss-crossing, multi-level pathways crawled with lines of servitor machines fetching and carrying boxes.

They were going the wrong way. Aranan sat forward, slopping out a splash of his drink.

'What are you doing, Keev?' he said. 'Where are we going?'

'There's an overturned hauler further down the Rennta City highway. This avoids the site of the accident.'

Aranan nodded. Plausible, but he was unconvinced, and his concern grew to fear as the limousine turned into a side street and coasted to a slow stop.

The shadow of Raspuc Keev opened the driver's door.

Guilders were no longer permitted to carry arms themselves, but they all did. Aranan pressed a microstud on his jacket button. A hidden drawer popped out of the limousine fittings.

Aranan blinked at the empty space where his laspistol should have been.

Oil-tainted air hissed into the car interior. Raspuc Keev stood by the open passenger door. Only it was not Raspuc Keev.

Aranan squinted. The street was dark, the driver's face masked by shadow. 'Who by the void are you?' he said. But he knew. He could tell what this imposter was about to do. More than the fact that he was there. More than the slender needle pistol in his gloved hand, it was his eyes, the only feature he could see, glinting in the dark. They were flat, hard, devoid of emotion.

You are going to kill me. Aranan meant to say the words, but they were trapped in his brain. They were too awful for his mouth to let out.

'Listen to you whine, you parasite.' The driver reached up to his neck, and deactivated a voice modulator. Keev's voice was replaced by a woman's. Aranan dumbly noted the detail.

'You have never done a day's work in your life,' she said. 'Every pleasure is yours, and yet still you complain. We should have wiped you out when we had the chance. It is time to finish the job.'

The smooth, silver barrel of the needler came up. The aperture at its front looked too small to be dangerous. It was Aranan's final thought.

'Corvus Corax bids you farewell,' said the woman, and shot Aranan Armadon Adrin through the heart.

Phelinia Eftt stared hate at the corpse sprawled across the seat. A pinprick of

blood welled from the tiny wound. That aside, Adrin could have been sleeping.

She cast off the stolen uniform, tossing it onto the body of the driver crammed into the passenger footwell in the front. Underneath she had a tight bodysuit that she covered over with a worker’s clothes.

‘Target eliminated,’ she said into a vox-dot at her wrist. Her words were scrambled and cyphered before being cast out to her masters.

She threw an incendiary device into the back of the car. The thumb-sized bomb bounced on the seat and lost itself under Adrin. Despite the grenade’s seeming inconsequentiality, the tiny amount of phosphex gel it contained was more than enough to reduce the vehicle to slag.

The car was already burning as she vanished into the night, dodging through the army of servitors loading and unloading the storage towers. Alarms wailed down the metal canyons.

By then she was long gone.

THREE

THE RAVEN AND THE PATRICIAN

Corax was shown into a modest suite of rooms by an efficient menial. They shared no conversation. The man wordlessly indicated Corax should sit upon one of two chaise longues in the main living space before leaving the primarch alone.

They were not a king’s rooms. In the few decades Corax had fought in the crusade, he had encountered potentates of every kind, alien and human. Differing wildly in every respect, a taste for luxury was one of the few commonalities between them and one that several of his brothers shared.

Roboute Guilliman was a lord in his own right. His realm of Ultramar was greater than most stellar empires, but his chambers did not match his station. Modestly appointed, they could have been those of any human dignitary or high-ranking Space Marine officer. Their size, however, announced who they had been made for. When Corax walked into rooms furnished solely for a primarch’s use, he experienced a curious shifting in reality. For a few rare moments he was no longer a giant, but a man. The effect of shifting worlds, he noted, was similar to that of disconnecting from the strategio-simulacra.

The suite’s central room was square, cloistered around the edges but open in the centre to a high ceiling decorated with a moving cloudscape in reference to the enclosed courtyards common on Guilliman’s home world. Living vegetation crowded the cloister roof, hanging swags of green leaves over the tiles and sweetening the air. More manicured shrubs stood in pots around the periphery of the floor. The unruly nature of living things had been pruned and

plucked into obedience, so they appeared as upright as soldiers on parade. Behind them were orderly landscapes captured in murals. Specially regulated light mimicked the glow of Macragge's sun. Double doors led through four walls of the room. All save the entrance Corax had come in by were open onto other spaces which were likewise decorated in pale creams, golds and blues.

Guilliman's tastes reflected those of sober Macragge. To Corax's sensibilities the murals and the pilasters framing them were garish. Anything beautiful had to be small enough to hide on Lycaeus. Corax saw art in small things. Self-expression was a private affair, and only reluctantly shared. The prisoners of Lycaeus had taken what little time they had to themselves - chipping rock into beautiful, flowing forms. Guilliman's alcoves and his straight-lined geometric decorations, all slaved to the tyranny of the golden mean, appeared simultaneously ostentatious and rigid.

Corax recognised that his perceptions were dictated by the austerity of prison life. Objectively, Guilliman could only be accused of vanity when it came to displaying how sensible he was. He put a lot of effort into that, sometimes comically so, Corax thought; he was so desperate to show off how unshowy he was. He suspected Guilliman hid a large ego and a terrible temper under his rational exterior, although on that score Corax had no right to judge him. He had both himself.

Still, there it was. Corax was engineered to hide, but he did not hide what he was. Not like his brother.

But when Guilliman arrived, he shamed Corax for his harsh judgment. There was only dignified solicitude in his bearing.

'I am sorry to keep you waiting, my brother,' Guilliman said. 'There were more matters that needed to be dealt with than I expected.' He smiled apologetically. 'There is always another matter.'

'You were not long, but I am glad you are here,' said Corax. 'I feel like an imposter in places like this. There was nothing fine where I was raised.'

'That is understandable.' Guilliman busied himself at a table, tidying up a stack of books that was threatening to topple. 'You must think our culture vulgar.'

'Not at all,' said Corax.

Guilliman smiled at the polite lie.

'Compared to some, yours are restrained,' continued Corax.

'Fulgrim's tastes must be overwhelming for you.'

'Boarding the *Pride of the Emperor* was like being punched repeatedly in the face by a perfumed fist. I was glad to be off it.'

Guilliman laughed. 'I wouldn't tell him that. He's terribly proud of that

ship.’

‘I had no intention of doing so,’ said Corax. Fulgrim was another demi-god with a god-sized temper.

The Lord of Ultramar straightened the books until they all aligned. They were differing sizes, and so neatness was confined to their outward-facing spines. Whichever of Guilliman’s personal chambers Corax had been in on the *Macragge’s Honour*, there was a stack of books somewhere, heaped up to tottering heights. The pages spilled untidy sheafs of notes, sticking out papery tongues at the chaos in the world. Layered between, harder strata in the towers of knowledge, were data-slates and other devices. Guilliman was by nature a fastidious man, with everything assigned a proper place, but this tendency to order fought against his thirst for knowledge. Guilliman’s quarters were littered with vessels for information, and he scattered them like the husks of nuts thrown aside by small animals as they frantically hunted for more sustenance.

Guilliman went to an alcove and took up a tray bearing a tall bronze ewer and drinking vessels. He set it upon a low table between the couches, and sat down. He did not recline.

Corax’s gaze moved from the books to the stern face of their owner. Guilliman looked only a little like him. About the angle of the cheeks was there enough of a family resemblance to proclaim their brotherhood, nothing more. Corax was pale and shadowed, Guilliman golden.

‘I saw an ocean for the first time only ten years ago,’ said Corax.

‘Oh?’ said Guilliman. He raised the ewer in Corax’s direction, tipping back the lid with a thumb catch. The Ravenlord’s sensitive olfactory sense registered the fermented juices of grapes wafting from its throat. Wrapped up in the smell were volumes of information: the alcohol content, the colour, the acidity and the other, less-tangible factors that contributed to them – how long ago the berry had diverged from its ancestor, the soil it had been cultivated in, fragments of gene-code from the people who had made it, the composition of the air it had breathed, the trace minerals in the water that it drank.

‘I will drink, thank you,’ Corax said. ‘There are no oceans on Deliverance,’ he went on, ‘and none on Kiavahr either. There were many things I had no experience of, and the abstract knowledge father engineered into me was no comparison to the thing itself. I lacked context. No wind, no sun, no rain. No weather in the prison but the same steady light and stale draught of recycled air. No food other than prison rations.’

‘A hard upbringing,’ said Guilliman. He looked guilty. His youth had been glorious by comparison. He was raised a king’s son.

‘I would say not,’ said Corax. ‘It was not easy, but several of our other

brothers had it worse than I. I was deprived of sensation, and when I see new things, I cannot help myself but make comparisons. My mind has become an engine for analogy!' He mocked himself. He had no idea why he was relating this to his brother. The words emerged. They seemed like someone else's.

'Then you have a poetic soul.'

'I have no facility for the writer's arts,' said Corax. 'The words will not come easily, but the images are there. Your books remind me of the waves,' said Corax. 'Your kingdom and the measured way you rule, it is the steadfast shore, it is your need for order. But the shore is pounded upon by the waves and so disordered. That is your need for knowledge. I look at all these stacks of books and see peaks of knowledge thundering into the sand. Order against disorder.'

'Are you saying I am untidy, brother?' said Guilliman wryly. He handed Corax a finely worked glass full of wine. Ten mortal measures it contained. In Corax's grasp it did not seem excessive.

'I think you could be. There is a tension in you,' said Corax.

'There is in us all,' said Guilliman. 'Father made us that way. There are tensions within us, and between us. The similarities between us throw the differences into starker contrast, and therefore create a further source of tension. Our competencies are duplicated, but are never in exactly the same combination.'

Corax thought of Sanguinius and Angron, Dorn and Guilliman, The Khan and the Wolf. Similar pairings, all different, and part of other opposed pairs as well. In his desire for knowledge Guilliman was similar to Magnus, or Perturabo, though their interests were divergent. He also had Horus' flare for grand strategy. Besides Guilliman, Dorn shared tendencies with Perturabo, who shared others with The Gorgon. Sanguinius had Fulgrim's artfulness. So it went on.

He thought of himself and Curze. His inevitable comparator. His back tensed. He compared himself with the so-called Night Haunter often, and did not like what he saw.

'I spend my life and all my efforts in reducing systemic tension,' said Guilliman. 'One cannot rule a realm of Ultramar's size any other way, but I have my eyes open enough to see that tension is a source of energy.'

'Tension pushes the Great Crusade outward,' agreed Corax. 'If yours is the tension between voracious curiosity and stability, what generates mine?'

Corax sipped the wine while Guilliman took a moment to formulate his answer. More information flooded his mind from the wine. How it must be to be truly human, Corax wondered. A mortal – a term he learned from his brothers, arrogant almost, but he could think of no better – lacked the

additional organs that allowed the culling of hidden truths from ingestion. The warriors of his Legion might experience the drinking of the wine a similar way to he, but their appreciation of it would be different: cruder, less refined. How alone he would feel, were it not for his brothers. He had been alone once. Corax was glad of Guilliman's presence.

'Yours is a tension between justice and vengefulness,' said Guilliman at last. 'You are similar to Curze in that way, though I would say the proportions are reversed.'

'Who is the more vengeful?' asked Corax.

'You don't need an answer to that. You have witnessed the Night Lords' work.' Seeing Corax's expression flicker distaste, Guilliman, ever the statesman, continued smoothly, 'But you are also similar to me. Both of us have a keen interest in the rule of law to impose fairness. We are both occupied by justice. Curze speaks of justice, but he is concerned with revenge, and enamoured of fear.'

'I seek justice, and peace,' said Corax. 'I have always desired to write a book on governance, to complement your and the Emperor's works on generalship, though saying it out loud the idea seems boastful.'

'You are allowed to boast, my brother. The idea is worth exploring, and I am sure you would do a fine job,' said Guilliman. 'Our species is fond of treatises on warfare, but makes little time for those concerning a good peace.' As he spoke he made a note upon a scratch pad by his couch. The screen fluoresced at the pressure of the stylus, very bright to Corax's night-attuned eyes. The pad was never far from Guilliman's hand.

'I am sure the Emperor has His own ideas on ruling the galaxy fairly,' said Corax.

'Naturally, but then why make children, if you are not interested in learning from them?' countered Guilliman. 'Our father is a wise being, but He cannot know everything. He made us for more than war.'

'I cannot know if that is true. You have spent more time with Him than I.'

'I did, at the beginning,' said Guilliman, somewhat sadly, 'though I had to give up much to do so.'

Corax drank a deeper draught of wine. It was hard to simply enjoy it. Its bared soul waved for his attention. The innate properties dissected by his primarch's senses crowded out the glory of the whole.

'Forgive the dour nature of my conversation,' said Corax. 'I am a latecomer to our brotherhood. I am something of an outsider. I do not see myself ever fitting in.'

'You are doing well,' Guilliman reassured him. 'You are respected by the others, and there will be time for you to get to know our father better when

the wars are done.’

Corax smiled. ‘I apologise. I treat you like an older brother. If my questioning irritates you–’

Guilliman waved a hand. ‘Not at all. You are not long with your Legion. Besides, though we were created at the same time, I am older than you, subjectively speaking.’

‘More time accounts for only part of your skill,’ said Corax, recovering some of his good humour. ‘Our adventures in your machine are proof that you are a finer tactician than I.’

‘The strategio-simulacra is a test of empire building. You are a force for liberation,’ said Guilliman. ‘Without the resources available to me from my other worlds, were the contest to be decided solely on the basis of a single planet, then you might well have bested me more than three times.’

‘But not every time, I think,’ said Corax. ‘You are the superior general.’

Pride and humility crossed over Guilliman’s face one after the other. ‘Maybe not every time. But you, my brother, are the superior insurgent, and the better warrior. Your mistake is to concentrate too much of your personal attention on detail. I prefer a grander overview, but we were all made for different purposes. The more of us that are found and the more time I spend with our brothers the more astounded I am by the majesty of the Emperor’s plan. I am not so adept at leading my troops from the front as you. You are a potent saboteur. I have learned a lot in the last few days. The lone assassins you employed against me were quite dangerous. Using such unstable troops is not something that suits my temperament, but their efficacy cannot be denied. I shall be looking into creating a corps of my own.’

‘My shadow killers? There are many suited to the role in my Legion,’ said Corax.

‘There are murderers in my Legion too, I regret to admit,’ said Guilliman.

‘There are bad men wherever there are men,’ said Corax. ‘But there is a condition that afflicts some of my sons. The Terrans call it ash blindness, those from Deliverance sable brand. It is a mental dissonance that plunges them into a state of deep and violent despair. A quirk of my gene-seed, I suppose. I have always been introspective.’

‘You should not blame yourself. Not one Legion has a perfect success rate. There are always problems, sometimes years after implantation.’

‘I have not come across a similar issue in the others. This problem is peculiar to my warriors. Your Legion, for example, is mostly free of difficulties.’

‘Mostly, not entirely.’

Corax experienced a flash of annoyance. He liked this brother, but Guilliman had an innate high-handedness he could not disguise. Especially when it came

to his Legion or his realm, he could be a little smug.

‘This problem has to be connected to me,’ said Corax. ‘The darkening of the eyes and the lightening of the skin of those struck by the affliction suggests a clear link. Around one in fifteen hundred recruits succumb, at my latest estimates – never many, but never few either. It is especially problematic among the Xeric tribesmen I inherited from father, though I have begun to notice it among my warriors from Deliverance also. When the despair takes hold, they are good for little more than killing until the mood lifts, and it does not always.’

‘If they are as effectively deployed as those… Moritat?’ Guilliman raised his eyebrows in a request for confirmation.

‘I have taken to calling them that,’ agreed Corax.

‘…you employed in the simulation,’ continued Guilliman, ‘you should see them as an asset. I will be instituting a similar assassin cadre in my Legion also. Despite what you say I am sure I can find warriors fit for the same role.’ Guilliman drained his glass in three swift gulps, an action that seemed out of tune with his considered nature. ‘Now, if you will permit me to change the subject, I would like to hear more on your thoughts on governance. The crusade will not last forever. The peace will be far longer than the war.’

‘If only that were the case now,’ said Corax.

‘Your latest mission?’

Corax nodded. ‘My orders send me to join the Twenty-Seventh Expeditionary Fleet at Carinae. The Sodality’s lack of respect towards our ambassadors compounds the sin of their refusal to comply. Negotiations have dragged on for six months. This is their last chance to comply before force is employed.’

‘I see. What is the nature of the insult?’

‘They are many. But there has been an escalation in tone. Most recent and egregious is their return of Imperial iterators minus their tongues and hands. The Emperor requires the Carinaeans to be punished. It falls to me. I am closer to hand than the Night Lords, who the expeditionary commander originally requested.’ Corax showed a quick, humourless curve of the lips, more snarl than smile. ‘The expedition leader, Fenc, wanted to terrify the Carinaeans into submission. It might have worked, and I think the Emperor wishes me to perform the same role. But I will not play impersonator to our brother. I have worked hard to distance my Legion from its past practices of terror. The compliance will be won cleanly.’

‘When do you leave?’

‘In two days standard,’ said Corax. ‘We shall depart next time we enter the warp. I am sorry to go. We have made good war together, and I have enjoyed

your society.’

‘A shame. There is so much more to discuss.’

‘As you say, there is always another matter. It is true for dialogue and war.’

Guilliman poured more wine for them both. ‘Then we had best talk quickly.’

FOUR

THE CARINAE SODALITY

From the bridge of the *Saviour in Shadow*, Corax eavesdropped on the negotiations ongoing between the Carinae Sodality and the Twenty-Seventh Expeditionary Fleet.

The ships of Corax's fleet were hidden from view. Reflex shielding was an adaptation of Imperial void shield technology used solely by the Raven Guard. The reflex shields inverted the void field, presenting the displacement face towards the vessel, and so all energies emitted by a ship were shunted into the warp upon encountering the shields, rendering them virtually invisible to every known form of detection. A reflex-shielded ship might appear as a slight augur anomaly, and to avoid suspicious concentrations of such, Corax had his forces scattered across the forward edge of the Carinae helioshock. Ahead of the sun's progress through the void its solar wind slammed into energetic particles coming from outside the system. At the boundary of the helioshock the Raven Guard hid in eddies of radiation.

Carinae was a bloated red giant. Ancient circumstances dictated it burn alone in the stellar wilds, having birthed no family of worlds. There was no attendant dust cloud, no flock of comets crowding the bounds of its influence. A lonely thing, a barren widow star whose heat would have warmed no children, were it not for mankind.

A thousand artificial moonlets circled Carinae in a complex interlacing of orbital paths. Every one was a great city home to tens of thousands of human beings. There was nothing of intrinsic worth within the system itself, but as

Carinae lay on a warp conduit that led deep into the rich Argyluss Cluster, historitors theorised the system to have been established as a colonisation waypoint in the distant past. How the billions of tons of materials to construct the Thousand Moons had been brought to the place was a mystery, but the arts of the ancients had been broad and mighty, and by their will ten hundred cities shoaled the void.

Corax had little time for the history of the system. Let the iterators pick over that once it had been integrated into the Imperium. More pressing concerns were at hand.

The Carinae Sodality refused compliance.

The *Saviour in Shadow* ran on minimal power. A single, small hololithic tacticarium displayed a system map of Carinae at the centre of the command deck. The heavy star was a tiny dot at the middle. A thousand graphical tags flagged up the location of the Thousand Moons. Other tags, different in form and colour, showed the Imperial fleet already present there. The Twenty-Seventh Expedition was at the edge of the orbit of the furthest city, arrayed for battle with its warships at the front and support vessels behind.

Much further out was a dispersed cluster of tags denoting the location of Corax's fleet. These were dimmed, representing their cloaked status. Neither the Carinaeans nor the Imperial fleet knew they were there.

A data thief probe plucked the communications streams between the Sodality and the Twenty-Seventh Expedition from the void, amplifying them into a tightbeam concentrated enough to punch through the reflex shields to the *Saviour in Shadow*'s comms arrays.

A crowd of hololithic figures thronged the deck, representatives of the Imperium and the Sodality. Reflex shielding could only mask so much, and its operation required the power output of the ship to be kept to an absolute minimum. All devices on the command deck were starved to feed the hololithic phantoms, including basic life support functions; even individual handheld devices and integrated bionics were powered down. The air mix was bad. Rising concentrations of carbon dioxide were discernible to Corax's preternatural senses.

In the voidal chill gripping the deck, the crew's breath billowed out as ghosts of steam to join the phantoms of light. The voices of the phantoms were out of synchronisation with the movement of their lips. Interference patterns rippled repeating sines through their bodies. The figures reflected in the black orbs of Corax's eyes, and for those men brave enough to look into them, it appeared as if he were a lord of death, with the souls of multitudes imprisoned within his gaze.

A tall man from a race grown lofty under low gravity was speaking. His

costume was elaborate: long, layered robes full of slashes and holes edged with wire embroidery to show off the clothes beneath. His headdress was a stacked confection of square boards mounted on a central pillar that emerged from the third, uppermost level as a silver spike, far too bulky to be practical under normal gravitic conditions. Loops of beads hung between the corners of the boards. As he spoke, the motion of his mouth sent them swaying.

'You have had our answer,' said the man. *'We have no interest in joining your Imperium. We are proud of our independence, we are…'* he went on.

Corax spoke over him to a man at his side who wore the uniform of the Imperial Iterator corps.

'Who is this one, Iterator Sentril?'

'That is Comptroller Thorern of Twenty-Three Planar Tangent, my lord.' Iterator Sentril's hands were shining metal frameworks cradling elaborate gears and pistons. Around the cuffs fitting them to the stumps of his arms the skin was raw with recent trauma. He spoke quietly, the grafted, vat-grown tongue in his mouth not yet fully seated. He had been to Carinae before. It had not gone well for him.

'Thorern,' said Corax. He spoke equally quietly, as if raising his voice risked revealing the position of his ship. 'He speaks Gothic with a minimal accent.'

'The lords of Carinae are cultured, my lord.'

'Then they should appreciate the seriousness of their situation.'

'Most of them restrict themselves to watching. These one hundred and twenty displayed in the hololith here are reckoned the foremost among the Thousand Moons,' said Sentril. 'They have no authority over the others, but they are respected as the foremost peers, and their lead is followed. If they concede, the rest will fall into line.'

Corax nodded.

Thorern's speech came to a close. The Imperial representative responded.

There was no primarch leading the Twenty-Seventh Expedition, it being a force composed entirely of Imperial Army and Mechanicum forces. The heavily decorated Admiral So-Lung Fenc, displayed slightly off to the right in front of Corax, had command.

'We are no longer offering you the choice. Do you not understand?' Fenc said.

'So…' said another of the willowy lords.

'Hord, my lord,' Sentril interjected for Corax.

'…you make offerings of peaceful brotherhood to our people,' Hord went on, *'and when politely rebuffed, back up your "offer" with threat.'*

'Your treatment of our iterators was far from polite,' So-Lung Fenc stated coldly. *'You cut out their tongues and removed their hands.'*

‘A point had to be made!’ said Hord. *‘You would not listen. After six months! We are not fond of such cruelties here in Carinae. You leave us with no choice but to descend to your level.’*

‘Hord sees us as barbarians,’ Sentril murmured into Corax’s ear. ‘He was chief among those calling for the mutilation of myself and my colleagues, despite what he says. He is a sanguinary man.’

‘For millennia we have managed our own affairs,’ said another of the thousand lords. *‘Why should we accept the yoke of another’s rule? We may value our solitude, but we are not cut off from reality. We have heard of your compliances. See!’*

‘That is First Citizen Dereth, of Outward-Twenty-Six,’ said Sentril. He swallowed painfully around the root of his grafted tongue. Corax glanced up, suddenly aware of the man’s pain.

‘You are in discomfort. Your wounds are not yet healed. I am sorry. You need not speak unless I ask you, and I shall try to refrain from doing so. Please, rest your voice, Iterator Sentril. I can follow what is going on well enough from here.’

Sentril rubbed at his throat gratefully.

Pict-feed of a burning city replaced Dereth. The First Lord narrated the images displayed. *‘This record was made by civilians who fled here from Hartin III after your “Emperor” sent His deliverers there. Civilians slaughtered by the hundreds of thousands, simply because their masters refused to join this “Imperium” of yours.’*

‘It is not surrender. You will retain your mode of government and your customs, save a few impositions from Terra,’ said Fenc. *‘We have been over this many times already.’*

‘And what will those initial few impositions become?’ said another, whose hat was the most extravagant yet. Corax decoded the symbology of the beads and tiers of the headgear. Each, he saw, related to the positioning of the orbital track of the city the man represented, and his name and title. They were mathematical formulae represented as jewellery. By this Corax knew him as Arch-Comptroller Agarth, of Zenith-312. *‘The Emperor. Who is this man who calls Himself so grandiose a title?* Emperor,*’* he said slowly. *‘A word connoting tyranny and subjugation. If His self-appointed mission truly is to unite mankind for its own good, why does He not carry a humbler name? Peacemaker, or saviour perhaps!’* he scoffed.

Several of the others laughed, their images jumping with data degradation.

Corax shifted in his throne at this mockery of his father. ‘Few men are so shortsighted as those about to lose power,’ he said to his crew. ‘Aegis control, prepare to disengage reflex shielding. Vox command, prepare for widecast on

all channels. Send out my signal via the tightbeam to the fleet to prepare to exit reflex on my mark. I want everyone in this system to see the Legion.'

Muted affirmatives disturbed the sepulchral quiet of the command deck.

'I submit to you that this is your last chance,' said So-Lung Fenc. His eyes were narrow in a broad face, an evolutionary adaption against bright light found on thousands of worlds. They narrowed further. *'We shall declare war if you do not comply, and take your cities by force. This is your final warning.'*

'Your true colours are revealed. You are conquerors, that is all, like a hundred others who have come against the Sodality in the last few thousand years,' said Agarth. *'Every one of them we have defeated and turned back. You say "comply" as if we are asked to perform a simple task. Your language is deliberately bland. Your talk of unity is a lie. We will not submit ourselves to your dominion!'* The figures froze momentarily as Corax's order was passed out up the remote data tether to the Legion, taking up the narrow bandwidth. The feed stuttered, and fell silent for a second. It came back online abruptly and all of a sudden the lords of Carinae were shouting altogether.

'We will not submit!'

'We shall not abandon our sovereignty. How many times must you be told?'

'Aegis reversal awaits your command, lord primarch,' said the chief adept of reflex command. His own augmetics were deactivated, and he moved with difficulty.

In the hololith, another lord spoke up. *'Your forces are too few to take our cities. We will stand united, our fleets together, and repel you. You cannot prevail. Depart, and never come here again. We are no threat to you. We have no expansionist tendencies. Leave now. Let there be peace between our civilisations.'*

'You cannot defeat us!' said another.

Corax rose to his feet.

'Drop reflex shields. Bring reactors to full power. Fleet to converge and adopt spearhead formation. Let us shock these stubborn old men into obedience.'

The command deck leapt into action.

'Ready, my lord,' said the master of communications.

Corax leant forward onto the rail around his dais. 'Execute.'

Power flooded back onto the bridge. Machines activated. Lumens flickered back on all across the ceiling. Servitors, slumped inactive, came to sudden life. The crew were talking rapidly, attending to a hundred systems woken from dormancy. As the *Saviour in Shadow* opened itself to the wider world,

the hololiths took on finer definition and the figures they projected moved more smoothly.

Corax let his primarch's nature show through his everyday facade. The effect was lessened only a little by transmission through the hololith. On every one of the artificial worlds, the Ravenlord's visage was broadcast in massive form, and his black eyes looked deep into the beings of a thousand recalcitrant lords.

'I am Corvus Corax, primarch of the Raven Guard Legion, the son of the Emperor of Mankind and the Saviour of Deliverance. Your time is up, my lords. Submit. You have nothing to fear if you do.'

On the tacticarium, scores of Raven Guard ships blinked from red to green as their reflex shielding dropped, their plasma engines already pushing them into formation with their lord's flagship.

Silence gripped the figures in the hololith, Fenc included.

After a time, a lord shorter and fatter than the rest, though still attenuated by Terran standards, ventured to speak. *'You will not destroy our cities,'* he said. *'You need us as a stepping stone to your further conquests. Why not make a treaty? We have presented it before, we shall present it again. We shall allow your ships to resupply here, you may continue on. We propose an alliance that benefits us all.'*

'We shall use your facilities,' said Corax, 'for your cities will be part of the Imperium of Mankind.'

'The Imperium of Terra!' snarled Agarth.

'We will not capitulate,' said the shorter man. Corax read his head beads. He was Gwanth, of Oppositional Negative-4.

'Then you will die,' said Corax.

'So you will slaughter us like you did the people of Hartin,' said Dereth.

'Your people will be left in peace once the war is finished, that I swear, but you lords have had your chance. You will all die,' said Corax. He paused to let his promise sink in. 'I regret your coming deaths, but individual lives cannot be held above the survival of humanity.'

'We endured the long terrors of Old Night without you, why do we need you to survive now?' asked one of the lords.

'Together we stand,' said Corax. 'Disunited, we will all eventually fall. Maybe not now, but one after another the lights of human civilisation will fail, and our species go into extinction. We bring you renaissance. I come here as a herald of mankind's second dominance of the galaxy, and you have rashly turned it down. If we allow you to refuse, others will follow your lead, and our kind will slip back into the darkness, leaving nought but mysteries and bones to be puzzled over by those who come after us.'

‘He avoids the answer!’ said one of the lords.

‘They still do not have enough warriors to conquer us all,’ said Hord. *‘Congratulations, primarch, you have succeeded in uniting us where hundreds of others have failed before.’*

‘We shall fight together!’ said Dereth.

Acclamations of support were given by most of the rest.

‘I have thirty thousand Legiones Astartes here, in this system,’ said Corax. ‘You see my fleet. Sixty thousand soldiers of the Imperial Army are a day’s warp travel behind me. That is in addition to the fleet already here.’

‘He’s bluffing. If they can conjure a ship from nothing, they could be baffling our machine’s senses. This is a play,’ said a wizened ruler.

‘There is no bluff,’ said Corax. ‘I am here because the Emperor, my father, desires that this system and all its peoples enjoy the fruits of the Age of Enlightenment. He has pledged not to let one single human being endure the night alone. You must comply.’

‘We will not,’ said Agarth.

‘Nor shall we,’ said Thorern.

‘We stand with them,’ said Gwanth. On it went. None accepted Corax’s offer. They either outrightly refused or remained silent. Corax’s expression hardened.

‘Your defiance will be noted in the history books,’ said Corax. He sat back into his throne and stared at the leaders of the Thousand Moons. ‘We shall meet again only once. My face shall be the last you see.’ He gestured regally. ‘End transmission,’ he said to his deck crew. ‘Hail Admiral So-Lung Fenc. We must meet with him to formulate strategy. This compliance has taken long enough already.’

Admiral So-Lung Fenc faced the ornate doors of his flagship stateroom, his captains arrayed in full dress uniform at his side. He had prepared himself to give up his command hours before, but now the moment came he awaited it with trepidation.

The primarch of the Raven Guard was coming to usurp him.

The room was aglitter with reflected light shining from polished glass, steel, bronze and gold. Fenc and his captains were a row of pristine white and black uniforms. Leather shone with polish. Were Fenc to draw his sword, the scintillas from its gleaming blade would be sharper than its edge. Marble floors danced with light refracted through crystal chandeliers. The doors were giant slabs of black coal carved with the mythic beasts of Fenc’s home world. Everything but the metals was lustrous black and white, but neither dominated the other. The ratio of colours was precisely harmonised.

A carillon blew outside. The doors were opened inward by richly uniformed honour guards. Outside, Corvus Corax strode down an avenue of trumpeters, accompanied by thirty or so of his officers and various other Imperial personnel. His Legiones Astartes wore black with accents of white, but the black dominated, and once they entered the room they upset the balance. Congruity was gone from the careful composition of form and hue.

Fenc tried not to shake as he looked Corax in the face. Charisma preceded the primarch like a bow wave. He was a shadow hunter. They said he could not be seen until he struck. Fenc wondered how such a being could possibly ever hide.

Corax's skin was pale as snow, his black hair long and free-flowing. Its lustre was reflected in eyes of purest black. No sclera was visible, and if he had irises, they were as dark as his pupils. Those eyes saw Fenc, they bored right into his soul, and his stomach clenched.

'Dim the lights,' Fenc ordered. His voice wavered. The wargear of his captains rattled as they trembled.

The lumens dipped their radiance and the dazzling display surrounding Fenc's command staff was snuffed out. Half-light took its place. Corax's eyes were engineered by the Emperor Himself, and could tolerate ranges of light far beyond the human norm, but Fenc had heard he preferred the shadows, and he wished to show every courtesy to his new commander.

As one, he and his officers got down to their bended knees, leaving the honour guard stationed around the room standing, still as statues. It was a feat made all the more impressive by the fact of the primarch's presence. It disturbed the humours of them all.

Fenc's staff bowed their heads.

Fenc took a deep breath to calm his nerves. 'I, Admiral So-Lung Fenc of the Twenty-Seventh Expeditionary Fleet, humbly greet the Primarch Corvus Corax, and hereby relinquish command of this armed force to his Imperial person.' He held up his sword.

There was a profound silence. Fenc stared at polished, chequerboard tiles, but he imagined Corax surveying the kneeling men. What thoughts could go through that mind? Corax was not Fenc's first primarch, but the feelings upon meeting them never lessened in intensity.

Abruptly, the threat of coming storms receded, leaving the air cleansed as after rain. 'Keep your sword, Admiral Fenc, and your command,' said Corax. 'We will be here only until this compliance is finished, then we will be away to a new war. You may all rise, please. We are equals here, engaged on the same glorious adventure to unite the realms of humanity. No man or woman need kneel before me.'

Fenc got to his feet. Leather creaked as his shipmasters and captains followed suit. He looked into Corax's face. The sense of dread had gone. Corax had diminished from awesome to impressive, as if he had reined in his aura. His face was that of a man now, albeit a giant, but not a supernatural being. And though he remained huge and his scrutiny bore down on Fenc hard, the admiral wondered if he had imagined his awe.

'We have been expecting you, Lord Corax. I am gratified you answered our call for assistance. The Carinaeans are intransigent, and the forces I have at my disposal here are unsuitable to bring this campaign to a swift conclusion. That is why we have taken so long. That is why–' He was babbling. He slowed his speech. 'That is why we are at an impasse.'

Corax placed an immense hand on the admiral's shoulder and smiled. Fenc's legs tensed against the force of even so gentle a touch to prevent himself being pushed to his knees.

'Forgive my lack of communication when I arrived. I wished to appraise the current situation before I revealed myself.'

'You did so most powerfully, my lord.'

'Perhaps,' said Corax. 'My hope was to cow them into submission. It is to the detriment of their people that they would not listen. Now we must get down to the bloody business of death. I regret it. This campaign has the potential for high civilian casualties.'

'Please, my lord, follow me.' As per their rehearsals, the lords-general of the Twenty-Seventh Expedition parted, forming a second human avenue to a second set of doors. The moment Fenc gestured at them, the doors opened smoothly onto a dining hall, where a round table groaned under a feast sourced from a dozen worlds. 'We have prepared refreshments.'

'Not necessary,' said Corax blandly. 'We have simple tastes.'

Fenc cursed himself for his mistake. Corax was prison raised. Luxury did not interest him. He was probably offended.

'I am sorry, my lord. If you would prefer–'

Corax silenced his apology with another smile. His teeth were whiter than his skin, perfectly even and flawless. 'Simple tastes can be indulged from time to time. I am grateful for your hospitality. I only wish to make it clear you need make no special efforts on my behalf. As I said, you are to view us as your equals, not as your lords.'

Fenc bowed. The group filed into the hall. Reinforced, oversized seats were provided for the legionaries, and the table was high to accommodate them. The humans were shown to chairs made higher than the norm, so that all the group might dine in equality. Corax had a throne that could be meant for no one but he it was so huge, like something stolen from a monument to a

mythical king.

Once seated, Corax began to introduce his companions by indicating two warriors with almost identical faces seated near him.

‘These are commanders Branne Nev and Agapito Nev,’ he said. The two nodded at the admiral. They were young, for their kind, but already of high office. ‘This is Nasturi Ephrenia.’ He pointed out a female of middle years, forty-five maybe, then another legionary. ‘This warrior here is Gherith Arendi, head of my Shadow Wardens. Most of the people you see here have been at my side since the days of the liberation of Deliverance. They are among my most trusted friends and loyal advisors. Whatever you have to say to me may be said freely to them. In this room there shall be no secrets.’

There were others, introduced with similar levels of regard. All of them were followers of Corax of long standing. It struck Fenc that so few of the officers were Terran, a feeling that intensified as he introduced them in polite yet cold fashion. Only one of the Terrans, a grizzled captain with dark skin that Corax announced as Soukhounou, did the primarch appear to have any affection for. Finally, Corax moved on to the remainder of the mortals accompanying him.

Strange, thought Fenc, that he included Ephrenia in the first round of introductions among the legionaries.

Corax’s astropath primus was present, as was the Navigator of the *Saviour in Shadow*, his fleet logisticians, four shipmasters of his capital ships, and the heads of several auxiliary regiments, the chief of which was named as Caius Valerius, praefector of the Therion Cohort. The Cohort were already well known for their ties to the Raven Guard, and it did not surprise Fenc that Valerius was seated at Corax’s left hand.

Fenc was several seats around from the primarch. If a compass had been superimposed over the table, Corax would have been at north, Fenc at east, and Ban-zen, the lord general of the Twenty-Seventh Expedition’s army contingent, at the west.

A variety of liquors were served. Fenc had commanded a special cup be made by the fleet’s finest artisan for the primarch. Corax appeared not to notice the workmanship, but at least, thought Fenc, the goblet, made of gold and cast with many artful carvings, looked fitting gripped in Corax’s ebon gauntlet. A touch of his earlier awe returned.

‘We will not spend long discussing strategy, lord admiral,’ said Corax. ‘Iterator Sentril has briefed me thoroughly. There is no effective central government here. Despite the Carinaeans’ insistences of unity, the Thousand Moons are distant from one another in geographical terms, and isolationist in attitude. They will be overcome.’

‘My lord,’ said Fenc. ‘If I may.’ He picked at exquisite food he had no desire

to eat. In truth he had been looking forward to the feast, it was better than the meals he was accustomed to on campaign, but his stomach was a hard ball in his gut. Fenc felt responsible for the delay in forcing Carinae's compliance. Corax surely thought the same, whether he showed it or not. 'As we have been here, the moons have begun to organise. The fleets of the Sodality now present a united front to us, under the command of the wayfarers of Aphelion-Nine. Alone, we could pick the fleets off, but together they are too numerous to be tackled head-on and are now well organised. I fear they have been playing for time all along. The intersections of fire the moons can plot risk cutting any major offensive to pieces. This is why I have not ordered an attack myself. They would hold us in place, and bombard us from every quarter. I presume to inform you, for which I apologise, but the situation here is fluid and has changed.'

'A commander should always speak his mind,' said Corax. 'But you are right, I am aware of these factors. This system will not fall to a grand assault.'

Fenc looked at his plate of food.

'I am also aware that you called for the aid of my brother, Curze. Terror would serve here, but it is costly. His methods have their place, but I shall show you a different way.'

'You have a plan?' asked Fenc, and immediately felt foolish for asking. Of course he had a plan. He was a primarch.

If Corax inferred an insult, he did not show it. 'I do. We shall attack key moons to disrupt these fire patterns your fleet fears so rightly. We shall do it quickly and silently. They will not know where we shall strike from until my warriors hold guns to their heads. In bloodless conquest, we shall show the peoples of this system the truth of our words. We shall make their leaders fear us. There is no need for indiscriminate violence. Once a few have fallen, more will capitulate. Careful selection of targets will disrupt their ability to organise, in case they do not.'

'My lord, it is a good strategy, but they are stubborn.'

'They can be overcome. Stubbornness is no defence against stealth and none against fear.'

'May I ask what my forces will be required to do?'

'The Imperial Army and Fleet will hold back. Your men,' said Corax, looking at the assembled commanders and the lord general, 'will be required for garrison duties once each moon is taken. This kind of void assault war is unsuited to your troops, as I am sure you realise, else you would already be masters of this place.'

Fenc tensed. Was he being criticised?

'You shall all, however, be useful in the conquest, and your contribution in

garrisoning and duties of final action will be invaluable. To begin with, I require that you make a cordon. The fleet will hold off the Sodality's armada and prevent it from disrupting our operations. I expect the first targeted moons to fall easily, but the trick will be harder to perform a second time if the thousand lords do not relent once the first wave of conquests are done.'

'Very well, my lord. Perhaps if you could furnish my officers with–'

'Later,' said Corax. 'You have the outline of what I propose. Let us eat this bounty you have provided.' He smiled, not terribly convincingly. 'My comrades will find it interesting to experience how rich men live,' he said, contradicting himself for Fenc's benefit, the admiral was sure. Fenc nodded gratefully and pretended not to have seen through Corax's somewhat clumsy attempts to humour him.

'Now, please, all of you, eat,' said Corax.

Once more, Fenc wondered if he had made an error.

'The problem with primarchs,' his predecessor had said upon handing over command, *'is that they are primarchs.'* Fenc thought that glib, but the old admiral had expanded his point. *'They are better treated like the old gods, not like men. Each one is different, no one rule applies to all. What flatters one will insult another. They must be propitiated in the correct way, individual to the deity, in order for worship to be a success.'*

At the time he had thought this a blasphemy against the Emperor's secular creed, but over time he had learned how right the old man was. Like many nuggets of wisdom, it was all well and good in the abstract, thought Fenc, but the old religion dealt with rules that were drunk in with his mother's milk and applied to gods who were graciously absent. The ways of this god Fenc did not know, and he sat at his table.

Under the cover of quiet conversation and the sounds of eating Fenc turned to the legionary sitting next to him, the Terran Soukhounou. There was one disquieting question he wished to tackle.

'Tell me, captain,' Fenc asked quietly, 'where are all the Terrans? Most of these men are from Deliverance. The other Legions I have served with had a stronger presence of warriors from the Throneworld.'

'What business is it of yours?' said Soukhounou mildly.

Fenc was taken aback. Today seemed a day for faux pas, but he pressed on. 'I wish to know what kind of man I am to serve under. Corax is my third primarch. Learning their idiosyncrasies was key to my success under the others,' the admiral answered honestly.

Soukhounou glanced at his colleagues as they ate and talked. Fenc thought he might protest, and cursed his lack of subtlety, but Soukhounou dropped his voice, and smiled.

‘I’m toying with you, I’m sorry. You have looked a little uncomfortable since we arrived.’

‘Meeting the sons of the Emperor is never easy,’ said Fenc. He feigned relief. He was now on his guard.

‘If it were,’ said Soukhounou, ‘then they would not be as effective as they are.’ He crunched hard on a rare mollusc. ‘Let me tell you of my lord. Corax is the enemy of the oppressor. He is a friend of the people. He was raised among them, taught by them. There were many similarities between the warriors of the old Legion and the liberators of Deliverance in terms of tactical preference, but none of attitude. My lord thought the old Legion relied over much on terror and slaughter to ensure compliance. That is not his way. They were too much like the slavers he overthrew.’

‘Too much like the Night Lords.’

Soukhounou made a careful expression which could be read either way.

‘I noticed the primarch seemed at pains to distance himself from his brother,’ Fenc said.

‘There are similarities. But they are not the same. Most of the Terran officers have been banished.’

‘Banished?’

‘My word, not his,’ admitted Soukhounou. ‘Lord Corax did try, but the Xeric tribesmen who made up most of the old Legion were too wild to tame. There are few Terran commanders left in the main body of the Legion, like me. Those too high ranking to strip of command or too dangerous to remove were sent away into the predation fleets ahead of the main expansion. They wear our colours, but they are a Legion apart.’

‘But the Raven Guard were celebrated when they fought under Horus, from what I know. What made him harden his heart against them?’

‘Corax is anything but hard-hearted,’ said Soukhounou. ‘He removed those men because they could not follow his philosophy. Human life is sacred to him, as is freedom, and justice. He meant it when he said he would not kill the people of these moons, only their leaders.’

‘You are Terran though, and you remain in command.’

Soukhounou gave a dazzling white smile. ‘That is because I am not a Xeric tribesman. I hail from Afrik. I am no slavemaster, and was critical of the practices of my colleagues. That alone is why I have the primarch’s favour. He is no friend to tyrants of any kind.’

‘Then he prefers his own kind.’

‘One such as Corax has no kind. But if you mean he prefers the company of those from Deliverance, that is true. It is of all men. Corax is of Deliverance. Their ways are his ways.’

‘And the others, the woman. I have seen unmodified humans held in high regard by primarchs before, as friends, but always they have been blessed with many gifts. What is her talent? Playwright? Poet?’

Soukhounou laughed slightly. ‘Ephrenia? You mistake our lord for another of the Emperor’s sons. She is a fine tactician and a bold fighter, but she is by his side because she has been with him since he was a child.’

‘Like a…’ Fenc frowned. ‘Like a sister?’

Soukhounou nodded.

‘I have never heard of such a thing,’ said Fenc.

‘In a manner of speaking,’ Soukhounou took a large mouthful and waved his fork around until he finished it, ‘this is Corax’s family. Do you not understand? His concerns are human concerns, mighty though he is.’

‘I see,’ said Fenc. It did not make the Ravenlord any less intimidating.

‘Do not mistake his affection for common men as a weakness. He can be ruthless enough when he needs to be, as my colleagues discovered.’ Soukhounou glanced at his gene-father. ‘I’d advise you not to press him on his choice of methodology, and I would not voice whatever plan you were going to put to Primarch Curze. He’ll take these moons, you can be assured of that. Let him do it his way.’

Fenc nodded.

‘This is a fine meal,’ said Soukhounou. ‘I do not share my Deliverance-born brothers’ zeal for frugality. I thank you for it.’

Fenc chewed on a delicacy in demand across thousands of worlds. It was like rubber in his mouth.

FIVE

SHADOW BOUND

Phelinia Eftt waited for her next instruction in an isolated service stairwell. Metal stairs curled around dozens of times up to surface level, and below, downward to the tunnels riddling Kiavahr's subsurface. A short landing lined with junction boxes broke the run of steps at her location. There were others similar below.

Many of the tunnels were mines sunk in the days when Kiavahr still had mineral resources of its own to exploit. Before the moon Lycaeus had been opened up for exploitation, the planet had been picked clean of everything useful. In places, the crust was so honeycombed with old workings that giant ferrocrete pilings were required to hold up the teeming cities above.

Where the caverns were not used for other purposes they were sealed off, as was the case with her current location. The stairs were caked with flakes of corrosion. The junction boxes were doorless, the gauges they had housed torn out. Lifeless wires poked from holes in the wall. Everything was rusty, russet coloured at the edges of Phelinia's lamplight, bright orange at the heart of the beam. Water pattered down the centre of the stairwell, and had been doing so long enough to eat a jagged hole through the metal near Phelinia's feet. Where the water splashed on the wall, furred deposits coloured brown and turquoise grew.

If one wished to run an insurrection, there were many places on Kiavahr to do it from.

She turned her stablight off. Velvety dark pressed against her face with

physical intimacy. Phelinia was no claustrophobic and had little fear of darkness either. She waited patiently. Mould spores tickled her nostrils. The smell of damp was pervasive. Despite the wet, it was hot in the underworld.

After some time a spy drone hummed up the steps. Blue running lights pulsed, pushing back the dark, replacing it with a gloom two shades off midnight. The drone was Kiavahran-made, fist-sized and smooth like a bullet; it exhibited none of the mystical nonsense of the Mechanicum. A Martian machine would be housed in a skull, or some other morbid item. Kiavahrans felt no desire to fashion the remains of the dead into devices. Theirs was a purer technology.

The drone's single eye blinked. It played a scan sweep up and down Phelinia's body. She held still while invisible, infrared lasers measured various aspects of her body to verify her identity. Satisfied, it turned about, shut off its running lights and flew back down the stairs.

The stairs shook under the ascent of her contact from the underworld. Again it was totally dark. She estimated the man's size, age and weight from his tread. He was very tall, heavily built, his gait suggesting he was probably at the end of middle age.

She had never seen his face. His name though, that she did know. He kept it from her as jealously as he guarded his appearance, and would kill her if he discovered she knew what it was, but she was not without resources of her own, and had found it out.

He was called Errin.

The last step. The landing shifted under his weight. He halted. He was completely silent – not even his breath was audible – but she could feel his presence, and almost fancied she could see him as a thickening in the dark.

'Eftt,' he said. He had a gravelly voice, pitched always low. There was a phlegmy click to some of his words, one of the reasons she thought he was getting old.

'You're late,' she said.

'I'm here now.'

'If you're late, I could get caught,' she said defiantly. She had no real quarrel with him, but picked the fight to show her strength.

'No one's onto you,' said Errin.

'It's a risk,' she said.

Errin chuckled. 'All we do is risk. I am sorry I was late. Unavoidable,' he said. She didn't ask for more information. He never elaborated unless he wished to. 'You did a good job with Adrin,' he continued. 'You sent a fine message to those fat guild bloodsuckers. None of them are safe. They are beginning to get worried.'

‘They need to be punished,’ she said. ‘I am happy to punish them.’

‘I know that,’ he said. ‘Phelinia the killer.’ He spoke her name oddly. She was used to provoking strong reactions. The Children of Deliverance needed her skills. They had trained her, but they didn’t always approve of the ends she put their methods to.

‘They lied to us,’ Phelinia said. ‘I don’t like lies. Their lies took away my parents’ life. They nearly took mine too.’

‘With the Saviour away, the guilds have lost their fear and are abusing their position again,’ Errin said. ‘Obeying the letter not the spirit of the laws. Always twisting everything. We will stop it. Corax has to know.’

‘We should be moving faster,’ she said. ‘This is too slow. We should strike multiple targets, behead each guild house.’

‘That is not our strategy.’

‘You are too worried about what the primarch will think if you shed too much blood. You are not bold enough.’

‘I do care what the primarch will think.’ The landing shifted. Errin came closer to her. ‘I fought with him. I was at his side when Lycaeus was taken. I was there the day he ordered the atomic mines dropped upon this world. I know how he thinks. I know *what* he thinks. If we reduce this world to a state of war, then the people will suffer the Imperium’s reprisals.’

‘I disagree.’

‘Need I warn you again not to take your own actions?’ said Errin. ‘We don’t want to provoke an Imperial crackdown. We need to kill those oppressors the primarch missed, finish his work for him. When he comes back, he’ll realise what he needs to do. The end of all this injustice,’ he hissed the word, ‘starts with us, but it will only finish with him. Only he can set this world to rights. We have to make him *notice*.’

He said this to her every time. As always, Phelinia struggled to agree. She’d wipe them all out, if she could. ‘Clear,’ she said.

‘I have your next assignment for you.’ He paused. ‘If you think I am shy of bloodshed, this will change your mind. This is a big one. This will make a lot of noise. Soon after this event, we shall be pressing our demands.’

‘Good.’

‘There will be a lot of deaths,’ he said. ‘Many innocents, perhaps.’ He waited for her objection.

‘Even better,’ she said quietly.

He approved of her resolve, she could hear it in his voice. ‘Then listen,’ he said. ‘I won’t be repeating this.’ He paused. ‘The Saviour’s Day is in two weeks’ time. There will be a major parade through the centre of Kravv City.’

He paused again. She waited for her orders with a thrill of pleasure in her

gut.

‘You are going to blow it up,’ he said, ‘and make Lord Corax pleased.’

SIX

THE FALL OF APHELION-2

Five of the artificial satellites were chosen for coordinated invasion. Several main criteria dictated their selection – the procession of their orbits relative to the other Thousand Moons; the weight of fire their guns could bring to bear in combination with their neighbours on eight key quadrants; the strength of their defences – those of medium potency were selected first, being suitable demonstrations of the Raven Guard's power without posing too large a danger to the forward insertion teams; the size of their populations; and, finally, the intransigence of their rulers. Corax gave values to each factor, then used a formula of his own devising to ascribed scores to two dozen possible targets. Calculatingly, he selected the five of the Carinaean planetoids that would provide the greatest shock to the others while delivering the largest strategic gains to his armies.

To the men and officers of his Legion and their allied fleet and army personnel, the reasons for his choices were moot. The primarch's word was absolute. The list went unquestioned. Target satellites were assigned at Chapter level. Strategies were formulated, mission goals within each city given to individual companies, and tactical objectives devised, planned for and briefly rehearsed at squad level. Atomisation of authority was one of the Raven Guard's greatest strengths.

While the Imperial fleet held off the Sodality's collected armada, duelling for the most part at arm's reach, ten Raven Guard attack cruisers sailed to war under the cover of reflex shielding.

Agapito's strike cruiser, the *Black Wing*, coasted to within eighty kilometres of the city moonlet Aphelion-2 undetected. No massed boarding torpedo assault or waves of gunships delivering troops under fire for the Raven Guard, but a silent stiletto strike of black-armoured troops on low-powered insertion vehicles. From the *Black Wing*'s hangars a stream of whispercutters issued. The light skimmers were unique to the Legion. Manufactured on Kiavahr by the guilds only for Corax, they were little more than skeletal airframes with hand and footholds for eleven legionaries. A repulsor grav array powered them over a world's surface, but as the craft were regarded as disposable, these valuable engines were removed before void operations. A single omnidirectional plasma jet at the rear provided forward propulsion. These burned bright one after another to accelerate the craft on to the city, then cut out. After this, the pilots fired their jets sparingly, timing bursts to coincide with weapons discharge from Aphelion-2 to mask their approach. The legionaries kept their armour systems running on minimum power. In the hugeness of a void alive with electromagnetic backwash, the whispercutters were to all intents invisible.

Agapito led his company personally, coasting in under zero power with his command squad. The eleven of them clung to the cutter's spare frame. A faint shimmer across the surface of the stars revealed the *Black Wing* curving away from the target. Agapito only saw it because he knew what he was looking for. It flew well clear of the salvoes streaking from Aphelion-2's guns towards the main body of the fleet, threading the tiny spaces between the city's remote weapons satellites.

'Any closer, and the ship could caress those kill-sats,' said Vey Branco. A proven warrior, he was nevertheless the youngest member of the squad and newest to its ranks. Because of this the others forgave his breaking silence. His vox was broadcast at minimum power. It would spread itself into the cosmic background static before it got anywhere near the enemy's receptors, and so Agapito did not scold him.

'This is close enough,' said Fedann Pexx, Agapito's signifier. 'Any nearer and we are dead.'

Like command squads from any Legion, Agapito's bodyguard had armour festooned with honours, embellishment and crests. They had specialist equipment that denoted their roles and rank, flags and vox-arrays of astounding potency and other tools of command.

They hardly ever used the bulkier equipment. Most of their actions were raids, and as on any other strike all were garbed in the same Mark III power armour, free of gaudy display, painted midnight-black with minimal ident markings in white that they changed frequently.

‘Emperor alone knows what kind of scanning equipment they have,’ Pexx went on. ‘We are taking a risk coming in this close.’

‘I don’t know about you, Pexx, but I want to get there this week,’ said Panar Kway, the sergeant, a grizzled killer who took on the piloting of the whispercutter from its single, small seat.

‘We’ll be there soon enough,’ said Agapito. He was concerned by Pexx’s defeatist attitude. It wasn’t like him.

They slid between the trajectories of gunfire. Giant shells hurtled soundlessly past. Las-beams strobed the void, striping their armour with neon bands.

‘That’s a fine light show they are putting on for the primarch,’ said Gudrin Ferr, the unit second. ‘If they try any harder they might actually hit something.’

Corax had led his fleet to coordinates where a commander whose bluff was called might conceivably head to puzzle out a new approach. A stream of projectiles hurled towards his vessels from the cities. Las light stirred iridescent swirls from void shields, but their fire was as yet uncoordinated, and lacked the power to break through.

‘Maybe they will,’ said Branco.

‘Don’t even say it,’ said Pexx, and made a pass over his face with his free hand to ward away bad luck. The gesture was a relic from his prison days. Not a superstition exactly – the inmates of Lycaeus were born of rational stock – but close enough.

‘They will not!’ said Kway. ‘Their shells provide nothing more than target practice for the interdiction gunnery crews.’

‘I never take anything for granted,’ said Pexx. ‘Bad luck falls heaviest on the unwary.’

‘Are you all right, brother?’ asked Ferr.

‘Never better,’ said Pexx, but there was a glumness in his voice all his brothers noted.

‘We are closing,’ said Agapito. ‘Maintain comms silence. Vox off.’

Without further words, the squad obliged. Quiet of the deepest sort engulfed them. Agapito scanned the heavens. Between the strobing weapons, he thought he caught a brief glimpse of one of the other cutters. Maybe not. He definitely saw no more than one. *Good,* he thought. *If I can’t see them, neither can the enemy.*

For much of the journey Aphelion-2 seemed an unattainable island in the void. It was like they were not moving at all, until drawing near to the moonlet shattered the illusion. A threshold of scale was crossed, and the city inflated with sudden ferocity. Clifflike bastions loomed high overhead. The

barrels of gun batteries were revealed as giants. A glinting mote of metal became a continent, replete with man-made geographies. Domes, vents, cooling assemblies, solar collectors, parklands encased in shimmering atmospheric shields, jewelled palace spires. The moonlet was asymmetric, and its shape suggestive of a slow accretion of effort over generations rather than singular design. Close to the centre was a giant sphere held in place by an array of complex energy fields. Aside from metal banding projecting the containment grid, the whole was translucent. Within was a model ocean, a sphere of water bent slightly ovoid by the station's weak gravity well. The shapes of large creatures swam through it, fading into obscurity not far from the surface.

Gentle coasting became deadly speed, though no further acceleration had taken place.

Where? signalled Kway, utilising Legiones Astartes battlesign. They were far too close to risk even the unit vox.

Agapito looked over their options. The scans they had of the internal structure were partials at best, supplemented by data gathered by the iterators before their outrageous mutilation. There was nothing familiar to the design. They had little idea of the central layout. The plan, therefore, began with this reconnaissance in force. Half the initial wave was tasked with hunting down the city's military command cadre, the other half with knocking out enough of the city weapons that a full assault could be undertaken by the remainder of the Chapter. Agapito hated going in so blind, but there was no other way. The energy required for a deeper scan would have revealed the shielded ships to view, and resulted in a ruinous confrontation of the grandest sort.

Agapito pointed over Kway's shoulder-plate towards a flat area fronted by crenellations. Doors led off either end of the truncated wall walk. What useful purpose a false castle wall would serve in the void he could not guess. Aesthetic, maybe, or some cultural space. Whatever the reason for its existence, it offered a way in.

The cutter's jet fired twice. The microbursts of plasma were lost in flash-frozen las coolants outgassing from a nearby cannon array. The sickening yaw of the cutter as Kway adjusted their flight path looked to herald certain death. Metal blurred beneath them, but there came instead a gentle bump as the cutter met the void city's outer skin. The Raven Guard set their feet down. Boots locked magnetically to the outside, halting the light craft. They had arrived upon the strange porch.

Cutters. Breaching field, Agapito gestured sharply. Their voxes remained inactive, all systems operating at absolute minimum power draw. In that state, their armour fibre bundles provided the least assistance to them. Less of a

problem under zero gravity than it would be once they were inside, but by then the game would be up and they would reactivate their battleplate.

Tiny tremors ran through the fabric of the city at the firing of its armament.

Ferr and a legionary named Qvova approached the wall by the door and took out lascutters from long holsters attached to their legs. The door was likely to be alarmed in some way, the hull less so. Half of the squad spread out into defensive formation, most of the rest took out specialist equipment from the cutter's central storage bin – charges, cogitator units, sniper rifles, auspexes and other devices useful to infiltration. Agapito's Apothecary, Daneel Otaro, took to the centre with the commander.

Kway? Agapito signed.

The squad sergeant peered into the reinforced screen of an augury array. He shook his head. There was nothing on the far side of the wall. Agapito signalled to Ferr and Qvova. Qvova slapped four emitters into place in the rough shape of a door. The smoky blue skin of an atmospheric containment field sprang into life. Ferr was already burning his way in when Qvova activated his own las-cutter.

Agapito waited. He decided the wall walk was an architectural conceit. A viewing platform, probably. He searched for point-defence guns primed to sweep the city surface of intruders, but he saw none. The city was reliant on the kill-sats orbiting it to keep it safe. This was not the first human civilisation he had encountered that trusted technology too much.

Ferr and Qvova were through the wall quickly. A brief puff of atmosphere escaped before the field emitters reconfigured themselves and clamped their energy sheath tight to the wall. Qvova caught the slab of metal they had cut away. The wall was only tens of centimetres thick, not well armoured in the slightest. Ferr poked his head through, bolter up, then beckoned.

All clear.

Agapito signalled his squad forward.

They stepped through into a dark corridor. Motion-activated lumens brightened. There was no other indication they were noticed. Energy parsimony, but no intruder alarms. Another complacency.

The station's deck plating generated a local gravity field not far off that of Deliverance's half-G. Agapito signed that they should bring their armours up to full operation. His helmplate came on, filling in a cartolith in the top right as his suit's short-range auto-senses scanned the area. More detail followed from Pexx's augury array. The map zoomed out as it grew, until he had a clear view of a hundred-metre sphere around their position. There were no signum runes to show where the rest of his men were. They would keep their suit beacons inactive until the fighting started. He trusted them to do their jobs.

Another legionary, Reicun, replaced the removed section of wall and held it in place while Qvova took out a canister of ferrofoam and sealed around it. The foam set on contact with the air, closing the gap. The repair would be spotted instantly, but now when the charge on the field generators died the atmosphere would not vent, and with luck no automatic sensors or maintenance drones would register the breach.

Hand signals flashed down the corridor showed the area was clear. Agapito took a risk.

‘Reactivate vox. Short range only. Full cyphering.’

A battery of clicks sounded in his ears as the squad complied.

‘Where are we?’ asked Otaro. ‘Looks like gun decks two levels down, but what is this place?’ He looked at a potted plant in the corner by the single-person airlock vestibule that led onto the terrace outside. Vestibule and plant were the only features. The walls were smooth and a soft beige, lightly textured, utterly bland.

‘I have no idea.’ Agapito racked a bolt into his firing chamber.

‘Doesn’t look residential. Doesn’t look much of anything,’ said Eldes, who, along with Timonus Tenef and Ik Manno made up the remaining three of the squad.

‘And it doesn’t matter,’ Agapito responded. ‘We’re moving out. Stick to powered gas rounds for now. Let’s keep this quiet as long as we can.’

‘Where are we going, commander?’ asked Tenef.

Agapito grinned behind his mask. ‘If there’s one thing I’ve learned, the rich enjoy a sea view.’

It wasn’t long before the inhabitants of Aphelion-2 became aware of the war erupting in their midst. The red dot runes signifying three of Agapito’s squads burst onto his helmplate, suggesting they had made contact with the enemy and had abandoned concealment. Blaring alarms confirmed his assumption a few seconds later.

Agapito’s own squad remained hidden for a while longer. They opted for stealth while they could, drawing back into the shadows as soldiers in light composite armour ran past their position. They were in too much of a hurry to see the armoured giants standing motionless not ten metres away from them.

Once the clatter of boots had drawn away, the squad continued on in the opposite direction, emerging into a canyon criss-crossed by dozens of walkways. People fled towards the city centre over many, but still Agapito’s squad went unseen. Energy weapons fire barked somewhere. Agapito’s suit cogitator analysed the patterns to pin down the location without success.

‘Pexx, locate that fire,’ Agapito said.

The veteran consulted his display. ‘Augury cannot get a fix on it.’

‘Never mind,’ Agapito said. They crossed the canyon into a wide thoroughfare with many side corridors and closed doors leading off it. The cartolith’s reach grew fast as his squad penetrated further into the moonlet and detail from the other squads filled in the areas behind him. A signifier rune flashed green and large over a gun battery three hundred metres away. The first of the force’s many objectives was fulfilled. A couple more runes followed in quick succession as the command squad ran further towards the centre. The thoroughfare broadened. Windows appeared in the fabric of the building, giving sweeping views of the city’s exterior and the captive ocean.

‘Look at that,’ said Ferr, staring at the ball of water. ‘That is impressive. If they can do that, I wonder what kind of weapons they have.’

‘Nothing we cannot handle,’ Kway growled.

The windows adopted flowing shapes, taking up more of the wall until it became totally transparent. They had penetrated three kilometres into the city, and still no one had come to fight them. The ocean was close. There was a pier extending out from the main body of the city into its centre, Agapito saw now. He sent a data pulse to his squad, highlighting the structure.

‘That will be it,’ he said. ‘That is our target.’

Using the ocean to orient himself, Agapito led his men on down a branching passageway. Half his attention was on the flash of red dots and steady stream of combat screed scrolling down the left half of his faceplate. He still had enough left over to deal with the men who came running out of a side corridor straight into the squad.

The warriors came to a skidding halt on the polished floor. Too stunned to react, they stared in surprise at the infiltrators.

Agapito’s men were blessed with superior reactions, and had their guns up a fraction before the enemy. Gas-propelled bolts made hollow popping noises. There was no muzzle flash, and no core detonation of the bolts’ solid slugs. The discharge was so quiet that when the men fell down in a sprawl and their guns clattered away, they appeared to be acting in a game or a play, until the blood leaked out of them and pooled widely across the ground.

The squad spread out, guns up.

‘Clear,’ Ferr reported from the mouth of a corridor.

‘Nothing here,’ said Manno.

The others approached doors and other ways intersecting, reporting every one empty.

‘Where is everyone?’ Kway asked.

‘Who knows,’ said Tenef. ‘This is easy.’

‘Too easy,’ said Pexx.

By now, the Raven Guard had spread out across the sunward portion of Aphelion-2, and there were few areas on that side of the ocean yet to be filled in on the cartolith. The squad picked up pace. They approached a high wall inset with an ornate door. Pexx raised his hand and closed it into a fist.

‘Halt!’ he called out.

‘What is the problem?’ asked Manno.

Pexx looked the wall over. ‘There is a large volume beyond.’

‘Kway?’ asked Agapito.

The sergeant consulted his augury. ‘Pexx is right. And I have life signs. Lots of them on the far side of the door.’

‘Are we detected?’ asked Agapito.

The city shook to distant explosions. Reedy alarms echoed down corridors.

‘No,’ snorted Kway. ‘We could have walked the entire Legion into this place. They are lax, and arrogant.’

‘They will know we are here soon enough,’ said Pexx.

‘This is the quickest way to the ocean. Do we go round?’ asked Qvova.

Agapito considered a moment. He pulled the gas bolt magazine from his gun, ejected the chambered round and replaced it with standard munitions. ‘It could be civilians on the far side of that door, but we are going to meet the enemy in force at some point. Change out your bolts for explosive rounds. We stop hiding now.’

The efficient clicks of swapped magazines gave way to stealthy treads as Kway and Qvova took up position either side of the door.

‘Locked,’ said Kway. He looked up at the top of the door. ‘No sensors though. These people are fools.’

‘Eldes,’ Agapito said.

The legionary knelt by a door panel, unscrewed it rapidly and attached subversion leads to its circuitry. A glance at the workings gave Agapito a fair estimate of the Sodality’s tech level. Reasonably high.

Something deep inside the door made a heavy, metallic sound.

But not that high, Agapito thought.

‘Open,’ said Eldes. ‘Easy, like Tenef said.’

‘That can change,’ said Pexx. ‘Be on your guard.’

‘Blind and shroud,’ Agapito ordered. ‘I want minimal civilian casualties. The primarch commands this to be a liberation, not a massacre.’

His men nodded and hefted the grenades. The rest covered the door.

‘Open!’

Pexx keyed his augury. The door parted down the middle and slid into the wall. A welcoming, musical chime sounded. Agapito had a glimpse of a dozen terrified faces before Kway and Qvova tossed in their explosives. The

blind went in first. A burst of noise and multi-spectral light dazed the occupants. They were screaming by the time the shroud went off.

‘In! In! In!’

The Space Marines pounded inside. People screamed and scrabbled to get away. The hall was big, full of seating areas and cultivated plants large as trees. A cultural centre or place for socialisation, Agapito thought. Five engraved glass doors offered a way out. Agapito ran towards them, scattering men, women and children, a lot of them crying.

The sensible ones noticed quickly that the Space Marines were not firing, and took shelter in the nests of seats. Humans being what they are, there weren’t many of those. The rest panicked, and ran to and fro screaming in terror. Others were trampling each other trying to get out of the side exits. A few threw themselves at their feet and babbled in an incomprehensible tongue.

‘We mean you no harm!’ boomed Kway. But they did not understand.

‘Out of my way!’ Agapito shouted at a wailing man trembling in his path. His voice came out as a terrifying roar from his voxmitter, and the man crumpled into a terrified ball. Agapito shoved him aside, eliciting a further scream. He’d probably broken the man’s arm. He had little sympathy.

‘The far doors!’ he shouted. ‘Move! Move!’

Qvova got there first, running straight through the door without slowing. Glass burst everywhere. A second later he was firing.

‘Multiple enemy ahead,’ he voxed. ‘Engaging.’ His brothers were at his side a moment later. Hyper-velocity flechettes shrieked into the hall. A civilian went down, his body pierced through in a dozen places. The civilians began screaming again. Agapito put himself between the darts and the people. A number hit him, pinging into his armour and sticking fast into the plating. Before he reached the door his left side was thickly quilled with needles. Beyond the doors dozens of Aphelion-2’s defence forces were arrayed in another large room, this one a long rectangle, three storeys high, with a gallery around all sides. Pieces of abstract sculpture floated at the gallery level, equidistant from one another. One wall was a single, huge run of glass overlooking the ocean. They were close to the centre, but now opposed.

As in the previous chamber, there was seating, this time arranged in high-walled booths that the enemy were using as cover.

Agapito plugged the gap between Qvova and Kway. Flechettes tinged into his armour, burying half their ten-centimetre length in his battleplate. Muted alarms alerted him to damage to the suit’s fibre bundles. Lubrication fluid seeped from a dozen holes. Ferrofoam sealant bubbled around more, closing the breaches. None of the darts penetrated all the way through to his

undersuit.

In return, the Raven Guard's bolters cut down the men without mercy. The room strobed to the firecracker ignition of bolt rockets. They punched through the booths. They shattered armour. Men were blown apart in short order.

Agapito switched targets quickly, putting down their opponents one after another. A storm of flechettes rushed at them. A few months prior to Carinae, Agapito had fought upon a continent plagued by violent hailstorms. The noise of the flechettes hitting his armour reminded him of that.

Bolt casings tinkled off the ground. Magazines were ejected and discarded. There were more men coming into the gallery from the large double doors at the other end of the run of sculpture, and lining up on the gallery to fire down on the Space Marines. Their numbers were impressive, but they were being massacred.

'Are they not afraid?' growled Ferr.

'It appears not,' said Agapito.

'We will kill them all, then. These guns cannot get through our armour,' said Kway.

'No,' said Pexx, pointing, 'but that might.'

At the far end of the gallery, a team of two men were wheeling a small gun carriage into position. Agapito aimed at it as soon as Pexx pointed it out. His bolts flew true, but exploded half a metre short of the weapon and its crew. An oily flare of light shivered around the gun.

'Energy field!' he said.

The men finished their setup, and aimed the gun at the Raven Guard.

'Everybody, down!'

The gun was a larger version of the flechette rifles touted by the soldiers, and it did have enough punch to break ceramite.

Magnetic impellers hurled javelin-sized slivers of metal down the length of the gallery. Supersonic whistling overwhelmed the constant rattle-bang of boltguns. Ferr was caught through the shoulder and spun about. Manno was slammed through the chest. Enough force was invested in the hit to hurl him backwards and pin him to the wall. Tenefer took a round through the faceplate. The angled front of his helm crumpled around the shaft. The point emerged from his backpack. Spewing coolant gas, he fell. Agapito saw little more. He sprinted forward to the first booth. The material was some kind of plastek, shattered into pieces and intermingled with the mashed flesh of the enemy. To his surprise, one of these soldiers lived and cowered in the well beneath the booth's table. Agapito scrambled through the wreckage and smashed the man's head in, helmet and all, with a blow from his left fist.

The enemy were shouting to one another, pointing out his position. They had

a bead on him from above. A shower of flechettes pinged into his battleplate. More alarms were ringing. The needles posed little threat on their own, but so many were hitting him it would not be long before they punctured something vital. He raked the gallery with fire, and turned around, but the bulk of his armour impeded him, and he could not see all of his men.

‘Status report!’ Agapito demanded.

Apothecary Otaro answered. ‘Tenefer is dead. Ferr injured. Manno is dying. Three minutes, at the most.’

‘They are reloading,’ shouted Branco over the clatter of flechettes striking metal. He pointed at the heavy weapon. ‘The magazine capacity is limited. Twenty shots, high auto rate. They run through it quickly.’

‘That is not much use. We have minimal cover here!’ said Pexx. ‘The next burst will kill more of us.’

‘Just cut the damn thing and draw it out!’ Ferr snapped. To Otaro, Agapito presumed.

‘Options?’ said Agapito.

‘I hit them,’ said Kway. ‘You hit them. The shield’s too strong to get through with bolters. We cannot overload it.’

‘Get the windows,’ said Branco. ‘Blast them out. They have no breathing gear. Introduce these stubborn fools to the void they live in.’

Agapito scanned the windows. His auto-senses gave him a rough breakdown of the composition. The material was similar to armourglass; though slightly inferior it was still too tough to shoot through.

He slapped his side. The single melta charge he had brought aboard was still attached to a loop on his belt.

‘What is the status of the civilians?’

‘Most have fled. There’s an emergency blast door in the wall. It will shut when the breach is detected,’ Branco said. ‘We can vent this chamber, the other will stay pressurised.’

‘Then cover me,’ ordered Agapito.

He leapt out from his hiding place. Aphelion-2’s meagre gravity worked in his favour, and when he pushed off with his legs they sent him bounding across the hall. Flechettes chased him all the way to the windows. The gunnery team hastily concluded their reloading and opened fire again. Their giant-sized needles shrieked at him, ricocheting with singing whines from the glass.

Agapito hit the window. Firing his bolter one-handed to keep the enemy’s heads down, he slapped the charge in place and twisted the fuse dial to a two-second delay.

It was already igniting when he threw himself aside and hurried into another

wrecked booth.

The glass melted through instantly. Air rushed out, sucking the melta bomb with it before it could complete its work. The windows remained in place with air hooting loudly through the hole.

Agapito swore with a convict's fluency.

Alarms whooped around the hall. A decompression gale tore flinders of broken furniture out into the void. The enemy were in a panic. Some fell back, leaving themselves open to fire from the Raven Guard, but the gunnery team stood firm.

The structural integrity of the window was weakened. Large cracks were creeping out from the breach.

Agapito raised his gun to finish the job.

Another salvo of macro flechettes shrieked at Agapito, forcing him down and his aim wide.

A stream of bolts whooshed over his position.

A creaking preceded the window blowing out with a thunderclap bang.

The breach enlarged and air vented into space with brief violence. Men wheeled overhead, blasted out by the decompression. Agapito was dragged across the floor, his armour squealing on the synthetic stone paving. His feet met the bottom of the window casement, and he braced himself until it was over.

Devoid of air, the room was silent. Armoured doors had shut automatically over the chamber's ingress points. Men clawed feebly at them, their skin inflating as the gases in their blood boiled.

Agapito rejoined his squad. He passed a man coughing up blood from his ruptured lungs. He clutched his throat as he suffocated. Agapito watched him die curiously. He wondered when sights like that had begun to fail to move him.

'Brother-commander?'

Kway's gruff voice broke his concentration.

'This door will take ten minutes to cut through.' Kway rapped the blast door that had closed over their entrance to the hall. 'By the time we are out, we will be surrounded. If they get enough of those gun carriages against us…' He let the thought hang.

'There is another route,' said Agapito. 'Otaro, salvage the gene-seed of our brothers, then let us be on our way.'

As Otaro prepared his reductor, Agapito looked out of the window to the ocean four hundred metres away.

'Who wants to go for a swim?'

Getting through the void without specialist void jets was a knack that all Agapito's men possessed. Though their armour was not void hardened, and therefore vulnerable to attack in space, all Space Marine battleplate was proof against the vacuum. They sealed off their cooling ports before leaping out through the broken window. Short bursts from their stabilisation jets were more than sufficient to get them across open void to the ocean.

They slipped through the containment field with no more resistance than a brief, electric tingle, and passed into the water. Odd sea beasts swam close to investigate them, darting away when Agapito waved his hands in their direction. Bubbles billowed from his jets as he pulsed them quickly to force him down through the water. There was a centre to the sphere of sea, and a gravity there, but merely sinking took far too long.

The sea went black for a while. Agapito passed through darting shoals of fish. Then light returned beneath his feet. Pipes rose up to greet him and he broke through a second containment field, and dropped down onto a platform a hundred metres across that was crowded with machinery.

The surviving Raven Guard followed Agapito. They landed quietly.

'I expected something a little more picturesque,' said Otaro.

'Me too,' said Agapito. 'Maybe a park or a viewing gallery.'

'Never judge divergent populations by Imperial values,' said Branco. 'Though I admit it is very clever.' He looked up at the pipes snaking into the water. 'They are using the ocean as a heat exchange. The water cools these cogitation units, and the heat they produce warms the ocean. I imagine the sea would support little life without it.'

'Can you shut it down?' asked Agapito. 'These units look important. There is the potential to sow disruption here, but it would be better to take as much of the city's infrastructure intact as possible.'

Eldes was fiddling about with a console. He had the guts of the machine spilled on the floor. Lights inside the casing winked in silent dismay at the insult. 'Not on the timescale we have. There is not much point interfering with it. From what I can tell, all the systems in the city are semi-independent. The network's got scores of nexus points. This is only one.'

'There has to be some kind of command centre here! Let us cut this short. Find it! We have been too slow.'

'I am doing my best. Whatever coding these people use, it does not speak Imperial Gothic,' said Eldes quietly.

'You got the doors open all right,' said Branco.

'A simple electronic bypass. Not a direct interface,' said Eldes.

'Let him do his work!' Pexx snapped. His mood was swinging up and down. Agapito made a mental note to talk to the warrior after the battle.

‘We will cut the head off the military here personally. Find their commanders.’ Agapito was about to continue when a high-priority vox chime interrupted him on the Legion command channel. He switched from squad comms.

‘How is it going in there, brother?’ Lieutenant Arikk’s cheerful voice filled his helm. *‘The primarch wants this over with. He is keen for me to commit my forces.’*

‘Negative! Hold off,’ said Agapito. ‘He cannot be so impatient or he would have contacted me himself.’

‘You are so confident of your bond with the saviour, brother-commander,’ said Arikk. There was a laughter behind his words. It was often mocking if rarely scornful, but Agapito detected impatience in it today. *‘He is busy. What are your orders?’*

‘Have any of the rest of the cities fallen into our hands?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Then you and the rest of the Chapter can wait. I will need half an hour. In the meantime, order our boarding parties to advance deeper into the city, so you do not accidentally kill any of them when you come in to land.’ He cut the feed before Arikk replied.

‘We must hurry. Corax is pushing to unleash the full invasion,’ he said.

‘You do not want that?’ asked Kway. ‘Surely our brothers have the gun batteries out of action by now.’

‘I do not want these people dead,’ said Agapito. ‘If Arikk comes in with his guns spewing fire, it will make a lot of corpses.’

‘You don’t want your brother to take his target by stealth while you have to call in the big guns, I think,’ said Pexx.

‘Watch your speech, Pexx,’ said Agapito tersely. The others laughed quietly. Agapito was annoyed, because what Pexx said was true. If Branne pulled off a victory according to Corax’s Maxims while Agapito was flailing about in some cogitatorium, he’d be insufferable. ‘Let’s get on with it. We have half an hour.’

‘I have it. A major command centre, four levels up, half a kilometre back that way.’ Eldes pointed.

‘Good work,’ said Agapito.

‘A stroke of luck, nothing more,’ Pexx responded dourly.

‘Then if good fortune smiles on us, maybe you’ll leave off with the talk of bad fortune, Pexx,’ said Eldes defensively.

‘Half an hour is not long. We better run,’ said Kway.

Agapito looked around the room. ‘Eldes, disconnect. Then frag the lot. They are obviously not looking for us here. Destroying this facility is a shame, but

we need a diversion. Let us be where the enemy do not want us to be.’

A rolling fanfare of explosions played them out of the ocean chamber. Alarms sang. As they ran along the neck of the pier into the deeper station, men were shouting and running for the dome. By the time they got there, Agapito and his brothers were gone.

Kway dealt with the sentries at the command centre door. They died within half a second of each other, silently, and without registering the presence of their killer until it was too late.

‘Thick door. Not thick enough,’ said Branco, running his hand over the metal. ‘I do not think this civilisation has heard of portable fusion devices.’ He placed a melta bomb on the door near the armoured lock. Three more were set at intervals around the outside.

‘You better be right – that is the last of our melta stocks,’ said Otaro.

‘Activate,’ said Agapito.

The bombs went off simultaneously. The door collapsed into sheets of sagging, white-hot metal as pliable as sodden paper.

Gunfire blasted from inside.

Kway and Branco swung themselves around the door, taking a shower of flechettes to the front of their armour. They fired bursts into the room, bolters moving smoothly from target to target.

Agapito stepped inside. Unlike on some stations made by standard humans, there was no need for him to duck the door lintel. The low-G-dwelling Carinaeans were as tall as the legionaries. Craters smoked in the walls. A wide display dominated the space, now shattered and sparking. The command guard were dead, scattered in pieces about the room in that thorough, grisly way that was the hallmark of bolt weaponry. Several of the command staff were also dead. The rest stood by their machines, frozen in shock, their tan uniforms spattered with their comrades’ blood.

A young man in a peaked cap gaped at Agapito, then made an indecisive lunge for a large red button.

‘Stop where you are,’ said Agapito. ‘I will not kill you if I do not have to.’

The man didn’t understand Gothic, but the meaning of the bolter trained upon him was clear enough. He put his hands up.

‘Pexx, Branco, shut down the power to the main weapons batteries. Drop shields,’ Agapito ordered. The legionaries shoved aside operators and began deactivating defences. ‘Otaro, see if you can save any of these wounded men. Anyone here speak the Emperor’s language?’ he bellowed.

A trembling officer stepped forward.

‘I do. A little,’ he said. His accent was atrocious.

‘Do you understand “surrender”?’ Agapito asked.

The man nodded.

‘There are other command centres?’

The man nodded.

‘Then I advise you to tell your generals to surrender. We will move on them when we are finished with you. None shall escape. Or you can all live. You have five seconds. After that, we start shooting.’

The man did as he was asked. Men huddled together, whispering fiercely.

Agapito ejected his bolt and racked a fresh one into the firing chamber, just to make the point. The mechanical clatter nudged the men in the right direction. They gabbled into silver vox-tubes jutting from a comms desk.

Within twenty seconds, Aphelion-2 was in the hands of the Imperium.

‘Lieutenant Arikk,’ Agapito voxed. ‘We have the city. You may begin landing suppression and garrison forces now. Stand down our assault units.’ He grinned. ‘Now, my brother Branne – tell me how he is doing with Aphelion-7.’

SEVEN

VENGEANCE DELAYED

Phelinia scouted out her target from a nest of coolant vanes jutting out over Liberty Square. Behind her was a warren of poky offices where hundreds of Terran bureaucrats worked, monitoring Kiavahr and Deliverance for the Imperium. She enjoyed the irony of planning a bombing while only metres away from the agents of galactic government.

Liberty Square occupied the intersection of five roads in the Kravv administration centre. It was a good choice for the Children of Deliverance's latest statement. A big space, difficult to police, but small enough that the force of the bomb would be contained and thus redoubled. Collateral casualties were unavoidable, but those standing on the parade route would be sycophants, she reminded herself, cheering on the tech-guild representatives. Some people had short memories. A statue of Corax looked north from the centre. In a sense, he would bear witness to the act of defiance. She hoped it would please him when he heard about it.

She identified precisely four places that the bomb would have the most effect in terms of display. She was a killer at heart, and her overriding goal in life was to make the tech-guilds bleed. She had to remind herself often that the main purpose of the coming action was not death, but propaganda. The explosion had to be bloody. It had to kill as many of the tech-guilders as she could manage, but more than that it had to be spectacular.

The guilders had to be afraid, just like her ancestors had been afraid, and her parents were still afraid.

Phelinia had been born six years after the coming of the Emperor. Following the liberation of Deliverance her family had relocated to Kiavahr. Her parents had expected a new, fairer world, but a stigma attached itself to the ex-prisoners and followed them at every turn. A few fine sentiments from a primarch were insufficient to overcome centuries of cultural prejudice. Her people were pariahs, even among the workers of Kiavahr, who were almost as oppressed.

Maybe this she could have borne, were it not for the fact that those responsible for generations of suffering remained in power. The Mechanicum ostensibly ruled Kiavahr, but the guilders were still in control of everything beneath regional government level. They chafed under the rule of the Priests of Mars, and vented their frustrations against those still beneath them. The Lycaeans – they were still called that by the guilders – were particularly abused. Jobs were impossible to come by. Accommodation, food, medicine – for everything needful to life, the once-Lycaeans were at the back of the line.

Her own privations were nothing compared to the stories of how much worse things had been. At first her parents had spoken of their suffering proudly. In those naive days of hope their memories were a mark of indomitability and righteousness, when deliverance from injustice was fresh, and the people looked to a bright future with Corax as their ruler.

Then Corax had been taken away by the greater war. The Mechanicum had come and settled over the existing power structure like a red robe. The body beneath remained the same. As the years went by and the injustices piled up, the stories of Lycaeus were told with increasing bitterness. Phelinia was born into a world of disappointment. Her governing emotion had been anger. A youth of petty resistance led to time in detention; at least the prisons were gentler than they had been. When the Children of Deliverance had come calling for her at the age of seventeen, she'd joined without a second thought. She took to their training well, so well she had never done anything else in her life but rebel. The Children of Deliverance provided everything she needed to do so.

The first choice for the siting of the bomb was down at the kerb. There was a utility slab to the left of Corax's plinth she could stash it under, but if the conduits beneath were inspected it would be found. The blast would be lessened by the slab. Casualties would be low. The incident would be minor.

She discounted two other sites suggested by her instructions, one by a traffic monitor and another behind a support holding up the building she was in to make a cloister over the pavement. The blast would be difficult to direct from either of them. Most of it would go into the crowd. A few deaths were to be expected. Too many would turn the populace against the Children.

Her favoured site was a lumen tree, and it was not on her list of recommendations. They were fools for missing it. It was perfect. The lumen tree was one of four giant steel-and-glass sculptures around the statue, forty metres tall, with twelve lamps arrayed around the sides and top. There was an access hatch in the base that would take seconds to open. If she pushed the bomb down to the bottom of the inspection compartment and back into the cabling it would likely not be found even if the lumen needed maintenance. The tree's metal was thin, and would be turned by the blast into a cloud of shrapnel that would scythe down the marchers. If she adapted the bomb to give it the properties of a shaped charge to direct the force up into the road, she could limit deaths in the crowd. The blast would certainly bring down the lumen tree. It would be seen along all the roads leading to the square. Best of all, Corax's statue would bear witness to it.

She would have to fool the internal sensors that it had not been opened, but there were operatives working within the state who could perform that duty. She could bypass the Children's command cadre and call in a couple of favours.

Her contact had said it was big. She would make it the biggest action she could.

That was it. That was the perfect spot.

Corax's mission was not finished. He couldn't possibly have wished to abandon the people to this half-formed tyranny. He had a larger struggle. It was up to the likes of her to continue the fight at home on his behalf. He would be saddened by the loss of life, but he would be glad to see the oppressors suffer. The Children of Deliverance were sure of their mission.

It was up to her to make the tech-guilds pay.

EIGHT

NON-COMPLIANCE

The Imperium was to put its demands to the comptrollers, princes and factor-generals of the Carinaean Sodality one last time. Corvus Corax decided to deliver the message himself. For additional impact, he did so from the parliamentary chamber of the captured city of Retrograde-48.

Hololith equipment taken from the stores of Fenc's flagship, the *Song-he*, was hastily erected in the chamber. Frequency tether bulbs blinked unsurely from composition desks. Image capture and transmission arches rose up beside golden statues. Loop projectors buzzed, waiting to be brought to full activation. There were cables numerous and twisted as a plague of serpents all over the floor. Taken out of its housing the hololithic technology was an ugly chaos.

At Corax's insistence, the makeshift setup was to be hidden from the Carinaeans so they would see only the Imperial leadership occupying the centre of government of one of the most powerful moons. There was to be space in the display matrix for representatives of every one of the Thousand Moons so they all could speak, should they so wish. A thousand discrete projection fields required accommodation. The cogitator power needed was immense. This presented a further technical challenge. Fenc oversaw the work himself.

Corax selected as his stage the Speaker's Platform. It had been cleared of the chairs of the seven ministers who had, until their recent executions, run the city. The rear of the hall was free of machinery, allowing the architecture of

the chamber to serve as a backdrop, placing Corax firmly in the context of the Sodality. He was its conqueror, and therefore now a part of it. Upon the platform were set two dozen Imperial officers of various types, selected mainly on the basis of how exotic and intimidating they would appear to the system inhabitants.

Fenc strode about the chamber with a gaggle of aides-de-camp in tow, speaking with his officers and the adepts. His work was required but his input was not. He would not have denied, were he asked, that he was delaying taking his place among the rest of the dignitaries. Having his command suborned to the primarch was bearable. Being used as a prop in a diplomatic show was beneath him.

Corax entered the parliamentary without Fenc noticing, and moreover, the primarch drew very close before he did. The primarch was so forceful in presence that it should have been impossible to step into the large hall without news of his entrance spreading to all quarters, and yet suddenly Corax was walking across the wide open space of the debating floor without any hint of his arrival. A murmur of surprise informed Fenc he wasn't the only one to be caught out. Work ground to a halt. A babble of voices torn between dismay and amazement filled the room.

The admiral experienced a clench of fear that Corax had been there for several minutes, watching him unobserved. From a rational standpoint that was implausible. Experience told Fenc it was more than likely. The galaxy was a much stranger place than the Imperial Truth allowed.

He masked his misgivings well and saluted crisply, but the primarch would have seen his fear. They always seemed to know.

'Preparations are complete?' Corax asked. He was an odd being, thought Fenc. Affable in some regards, certainly more so than many of his brothers. But like all of the primarchs he had a sureness about him that crossed the line to arrogance, and in Corax this was exacerbated by the distance inherent to his manner. They could not be friends, not ever. Fenc knew this with complete certainty.

'Nearly so, my lord,' said Fenc. He reported on matters that could have been left to a junior lieutenant. Pride and a desire to stand firm in front of Corax made him speak, ramrod straight, as if he were on parade. 'There have been a few difficulties integrating our machinery with the power systems of this city, and further issues to overcome regarding the compatibility of the Sodality's tri-d technology with the hololith to create a remote audience of this scale. The conference before worked well enough, but this is a more ambitious undertaking. Magos Bernt tells me that the more compartmentalised the incoming feeds, the more the divergence between our technologies becomes

apparent. Some mismatch in data rate for the ribbon projectors, apparently.’ He gestured towards Magos Bernt, whose defining feature was a mass of writhing mechadendrites lashing about over his stooped back.

‘It has been resolved? This message must be delivered flawlessly.’

‘Yes, my lord,’ said Fenc. ‘All is prepared.’ He resisted the urge to continuing speaking.

‘Good,’ said Corax. He moved closer. ‘This is an important moment in this compliance.’

At a distance of two metres, Fenc could look Corax in the face without craning his neck, but up close the angles were wrong. His spine cracked as he strained to keep the primarch’s eye. The back of his head rubbed on his heavy brocade collar.

‘I fervently wish that your plan works, my lord,’ said Fenc. He did not believe it would.

When a new commander came breezing into an established warzone, they always had new ideas and better ways of doing things. Sometimes, those methods worked. Often they could not. A newcomer did not take into account factors that were, to those already present, glaringly obvious. Fenc had seen this mistake made by all confident men assuming new positions of command, from maintenance crew overseers to the primarchs themselves. No one was immune to hubris.

Fenc was a military man through and through, but he was a good judge of character. He suspected the same held true of any human hierarchy. Power came with blinkers.

‘There is a use for weaponised information,’ Corax said. ‘Propaganda is its own bladed edge.’

‘We are ready, my lord,’ spoke Magos Bernt.

‘Thank you,’ Fenc and Corax said together. Corax gave Fenc a little smile that flustered Fenc.

Corax stepped up onto the stage, taking his place at the fore of the assemblage. Fenc reluctantly joined him. His place was at the front, as his office demanded.

‘Begin then,’ said Corax.

Magos Bernt bowed. Under normal circumstances the mechanisms of a hololith were hidden away. In the parliamentary chamber its guts were on open display. Boards of lights twinkled. Shining flywheels spun and stopped and spun again. The tether bulbs pulsed and shone true. The pale light of image collection beams shone on the group, and through the mechanisms arranged around them, sent their tri-d vid phantoms system-wide.

‘People and governments of the Carinae Sodality,’ the primarch began.

‘When we spoke yesterday you were of a single mind not to heed the generous offer of the Imperium. We speak again today, when I am in possession of eight of your cities. These eight were taken within three hours of each other by a small portion of the forces available to me. There were, regrettably, deaths, included among them the seven elected lords who ruled this city of Retrograde-Forty-Eight.’

Operators interjected hololithic pictures of the captured cities into the feed. Their exteriors were crowded by Imperial warships, better showing the huge size of the vessels Corax commanded. But included also were interior flat-vid feeds of thoroughfares busy with people moving freely under the watchful eyes of the Raven Guard.

‘Your people are safe. The rest of you lords can be so also. Hear then once again this offer of friendship and peace sent out into the stars by my father, the Emperor of Mankind. There is nothing to lose by your compliance, and everything to gain. Join us, and your civilisation will remain as it always has been, and enveloped in a cloak of security. You shall be welcomed into the brotherhood of man and protected from the dangers of this turbulent galaxy. The opportunities for trade, expansion and enrichment are beyond anything you may have considered before.’

A projector blinked. A face appeared, floating in miniature before Corax. It was rendered deliberately small, partly for reasons of space, partly so that Corax might stare down at it from imperious heights.

‘We have everything to lose,’ said the ruler of 37-Degrees Declination. *‘Our freedom, our agency, our will. You are barbarians from a broken world come demanding tribute of your betters.’*

More of the spheres shone. More faces materialised, all of them bearing the high hats and festoons of beads that marked their exalted station.

‘He is right,’ said one.

‘We will not yield,’ said another.

A minority had spoken before. Fewer still showed themselves this time, a fact that seemed to please Corax.

‘There will be a new seven lords of Retrograde-Forty-Eight, chosen by the votes of its people as has been the case for many millennia. The removal of the incumbents will be a short interruption,’ he said. ‘But there need not be a new prince of Spinward Superior. There need not be a new arch-comptroller of Zenith-Three-One-Two,’ he said, naming two of the rulers who had been most vocal in opposition of compliance before. Neither had yet initiated their own broadcasts. ‘And there need not be a new High Councillor of Thirty-Seven-Degrees Declination. However, you can be sure there will be new rulers in all of these cities if you do not comply. I ask that you reflect on how

easily these eight cities were taken, and consider how easily the remainder may fall to my men. Ask the population here how they have been treated. You will see you have nothing to fear. Consider your own positions, consider your own people. We will welcome your cities into the Imperium with open arms. I would prefer it if the hands of those arms held no weapons. I would prefer if no more blood were spilt.'

Corax raised the index finger of his left hand, the signal to hold transmission.

The faces winked out one by one.

'We wait?' asked Branne.

The primarch appeared to pay particular attention to everything this Branne and the other, Agapito, said. The commanders had a close resemblance that went beyond the enforced homogeneity of gene-seed bonds. They also had the same patronymic. Fenc assumed they were true brothers.

'We wait,' said Corax.

Fenc kept his position on the platform. The buzz of complaining hololithic equipment merged with the whispered placations of Mechanicum adepts in an eerie, hypnotic combination that denied the right of other sounds to be heard. A cathedral quiet fell, full of mumbling and the buzz of electricity.

Three minutes passed before a single self-contained sphere of light fizzled into being, displaying the lugubrious face of a man preserved beyond the span of mortal years by medical means.

'I am Wondril, the Duke of Polar-Three,' he said gravely. *'I hear your message. Following consultation with my council, and after addressing the concerns of our population, we have decided to accept your offer. We regret our prior deafness to the reasonableness of your position, and humbly beg your forgiveness.'*

'I cannot forgive you, because there is nothing to forgive.'

Corax's disappointment loured behind his smile. It would be better if the leaders not beg. Having so craven a submission was suboptimal for the primarch's purposes. A proud leader who made the choice more freely would have been ideal. A man who surrendered with honour intact was more likely to convince his peers to follow. A groveller would harden their resolve.

'You make the right choice. You are most welcome into the Imperium of Man,' said Corax. 'I name you brother, and–'

Wondril's image broke apart momentarily, his face smeared sideways by jagged, lateral lines that carried off his features to the left and right. It briefly snapped back into clarity. *'What? What's happening?'* said Wondril. He looked up in alarm.

The broadcast from Polar-3 ceased.

'My lord!' called out a Therion aide. 'The Carinaeans have opened fire on

Polar-Three.’

‘Show us,’ said Fenc.

Fenc’s officers competed with Corax’s Therion minions to obey. Corax’s men won out. A portable hololithic table was brought forward for the primarch’s benefit. A grainy image of Polar-3 flickered on over the dull, black surface. The higher officers left the platform to crowd around it.

Phased particle beams sliced into Polar-3 from all sides in such numbers there was more light than black in the void. The energy shielding had already collapsed. Clouds of debris and vented gases floated around the moon. The beams would take a while to demolish Polar-3 on their own. The core of the city was still whole, but the storm of hard projectiles launched as the beam weapon attack began would smash it to atoms.

‘Can we save it?’ asked Corax. He tracked the incoming ordnance. Reduced so markedly in scale, they crawled across the ersatz void.

‘No, my lord,’ said Fenc, consulting his own system cartograph displayed on a data-slate held by one of his adjutants. The amount of firepower kicked out from the other cities was incredible. Polar-3, unable to manoeuvre easily, would take most of the storm as direct hits. ‘We could shoot down maybe half of the missiles, perhaps a fifth of the shells and mass projectiles. The rest would get through. To achieve this modest reduction, we would have to reposition. We would leave our conquered territories vulnerable, and any run to shelter Polar-Three would put the fleet in this death quadrant here. May I?’ he asked.

Corax nodded. Fenc dragged the information from his slate with an auto-stylus and directed it into the hololith. The death of Polar-3 was replaced by a graphics-heavy strategic display of the middle system. A wide kill-zone shone an angry red. ‘We would be under fire from approximately three hundred of the cities in this area, four hundred as we neared Polar-Three.’

‘Then a rescue mission is also impossible,’ said Corax.

‘Regrettably so, my lord,’ said Fenc. He’d already calculated the risk. It was far too high.

‘This is too smooth. It looks planned to me,’ said Agapito.

‘The Carinaeans have the advantage of knowing each other well,’ said Corax. ‘If their intelligence is good enough, they could have anticipated Wondril’s surrender, but it is as likely that they were poised to fire on whoever broke ranks.’

‘He was among the few who contemplated compliance seriously from the start,’ said Branne. ‘This is going to send a powerful message to the rest.’

‘My lord, there is an incoming transmission,’ said a communications officer.

‘Display,’ said Corax.

The hololith crackled. The machines pitched to a higher tone. The individual portrait fields for the thousand rulers came on at once. In the place of multiple people was a single composite face.

‘Arch-Comptroller Agarth,’ said Corax.

The elements comprising Agarth’s face were incompletely aligned. Disjointed movement rippled through the swarm of tri-d picts that made up this gestalt man.

‘Listen to me, son of the tyrant,’ said Agarth, his giant visage glowering at Corax. His eyes bulged moistly. The projection fields remained imprecisely coordinated and his movements jumped from sphere to sphere. *‘This is how we will deal with any who bow to your demands. They shall be marked as traitors by the rest. Not one city in this system will surrender to you. Begone from here. Your pathetic show capturing a handful of our confederates has changed nothing. There are yet a thousand left. Can you stand before the full might of our guns and evade our fleet? Creeping into our kingdoms to snatch single victories will avail you of nothing. We will force you to face us like men and you will die. I say to you, son of the so-called Emperor, leave, or perish.’*

‘The Imperium is vast and powerful,’ said Corax. ‘I am but the point of the blade. You cannot resist me. You can defy my father all you wish. In the end your compliance is inevitable. Accept it now. You are one system. I have thousands at my back. You cannot stand before us. I shall break you.’

‘We shall see how much blood your father is willing to expend in taking our homes from us,’ said Agarth. *‘Leave us be, before we all suffer for your aggression.’*

‘My father would spend all the blood there is. He will not permit any human society to suffer outside His protection,’ said Corax. ‘It is His duty to bring enlightenment to the galaxy.’

‘We are enlightened enough,’ said Agarth.

‘I say otherwise,’ said Corax.

‘Then many will die,’ said Agarth. *‘How does that sit with your conscience, saviour?’*

The hololith cut out. Agarth’s face disappeared in a strobed flash of deactivated bubble fields. Ribbon projectors sighed at the end of the effort of creating one coherent image from a thousand individual displays.

Fenc glanced up at the primarch. Corax radiated dissatisfaction.

‘Sentril, tell me of Agarth. How much control does he have over the others?’ Corax asked. ‘Is this a bluff, or do all the cities now speak with his voice?’

Sentril, who had been conspicuously displayed near the front of the group so the Sodality could see that his mutilations had been made good, stepped closer to speak. ‘Before, not very much. My impression was that the other

lords were intimidated by him. His city is larger than most, and better equipped for war. He is aggressive, and was ill-liked. Your presence has changed the situation here greatly. He was agitating for direct confrontation with the Imperium as soon as we iterators had delivered the first offer to the Sodality presidium. At the beginning, he was dismissed, but the destruction of 27-42 made them militant. They are frightened.'

'The scouring of Hartin was regrettable,' said Corax, 'and poorly timed.'

Fenc's back stiffened. His expedition had been responsible for the massacre there.

'But it is done, my lord,' said Sentril. 'So we must deal with the consequences.' He spared a look of sympathy for Fenc. 'The Sodality see themselves in the same position, threatened by an external foe, only they regard themselves as a greater power than others we have faced. They think they can win.'

'They have no conception of the enemies we have overcome,' said Corax.

'They still believe they will prevail where Hartin fell,' said Sentril.

'I will prove their confidence misplaced,' said Corax. 'Zenith-Three-One-Two is Agarth's city. It is there we will strike next. It is the logical target. An escalating display of our abilities will shake the others' convictions. Therefore, I will lead the assault myself and bring Agarth before this hololithic projector in chains to show his fellows.'

'I mean no disrespect,' said Sentril, 'but you underestimate their pride. We have gone past the point of convincing them.'

'We shall see,' said Corax.

'My lord, please reconsider,' said Fenc. He began hesitantly, but as the words left his mouth they grew louder. His conviction strengthened. He spread his hands out, palms down, in an emphatic gesture of disagreement. 'My lord, no.'

Corax looked at him oddly. There was some new respect in his expression, but a deal of anger.

'You say no to me?'

Fenc trembled. Corax radiated calm and reasonableness, and yet even with so neutral an aspect the power of him bore down on the admiral. The gaze of his black eyes pressed into him.

'Fenc, I was sent here because you have so far failed to convince the Sodality to compliance, and have presented no military solution to force the issue. Now you say that the plan I have formulated is lacking?' Corax gave a short laugh of disbelief. He sounded almost like a normal man delivering his recrimination. 'What is your objection?' asked Corax. 'Voice it now. Remember that you speak with a son of the Emperor.'

How could Fenc possibly forget that? He almost submitted to the overpowering will of the primarch. But his people were proud. Fenc stood his ground.

‘Agarth is correct, my lord,’ said Fenc, forcing himself to stare into the wells of darkness Corax had for eyes. ‘We face a long and costly campaign.’

‘You do not think we can win? You do not think I can do what I have said I am going to do?’ said Corax. Through the unease the primarch engendered in him, Corax’s self-belief struck Fenc. He is arrogant, thought the admiral. That makes him rash.

‘Naturally, we will win,’ said the admiral measuredly. ‘What concerns me is how quickly, and at what cost.’ Corax watched him, his pale face impassive. Fenc pushed on, quickening his speech before his resolve fled. ‘The Thousand Moons are adjusting their orbits. They are bringing themselves closer together physically and politically. Their confederated habits are vanishing in the face of our might. They are uniting. The war is changing before it has properly begun.’ Fenc looked to Sentril for support.

‘This is true, my lord,’ said Sentril. ‘This system has been watched for the last century. They have before never displayed this level of cooperation. Their orbits are defined by treaty, signed at the close of their last internal war. Moving the cities is an act their culture will not take lightly.’

‘They have decided that they are going to fight against us. Whatever we do now, they will not back down,’ said Fenc. ‘United, they present a significant challenge. Your actions have clarified the situation, and I thank you for your intervention. It is my contention that we must strike at them in force before they fully consolidate their militaries. The time for stealth and gesture is done. We need to begin a full assault. I can have orders drafted for your approval within the hour.’

There was a long pause where Corax’s black eyes bored into Fenc’s own. A run of sweat tickled its way down from his temple, over his cheek and inside his high collar.

‘The cost will be too great. Hundreds of thousands will die. Many of the cities will be lost,’ said Corax. ‘This Agarth must fall. We shall take his city from him. Once that is done, the rest will capitulate.’

‘But, my lord, you are wrong,’ said Fenc. His back was soaking with sweat. Defying Corax was a physical effort. ‘The cities move slowly, but once they have reconfigured their orbits about Carinae, the difficulty of our task will be multiplied enormously. I have already run simulations of action against a better disposed Sodality. Our projected losses are here, in this report.’ He took a second slate from his adjutant, and held it out to the primarch. Corax glanced at it but did not take it. ‘The Twenty-Seventh Expedition has standing

orders to push deeper into the Argyluss Cluster. We are due to link with the Seventy-Sixth Expeditionary Fleet in six months. There are four class-six human societies between us and their projected path. Iterator overtures have gone well in only two. We will not make the rendezvous if we do not act now. In the worst scenario, this fleet will be too heavily damaged to wage further war, holding up the entire line of advance for the crusade in this subsector.'

Lines appeared on Corax's forehead like fractures in a white cliff about to collapse. Something in him changed, perhaps consciously, perhaps not, but Fenc found himself looking up into the face of something inhuman.

'I am not proposing inaction, Fenc,' said Corax. His voice resonated painfully in the admiral's skull. 'You disgrace yourself. This all-out attack you propose is inefficient and will bring about the result you wish to avoid. Agarth's fall will end this. I will see to his capture personally. The decision is taken. Now leave me. You will return to your ship to await orders for the deployment of the fleet. Do you understand?'

Fenc's face burned with anger.

'Yes, my lord,' he said, and bowed.

Disaster awaited them. Corax might be a primarch, thought Fenc as he left the chamber, but he is not infallible.

NINE

SABLE BRAND

Agapito could not concentrate. He was waiting for Branne. For months they had been assigned to different fleets. Legion bonds were supposed to supersede those of family, but in those rare cases of legionaries who were birth brothers also, blood ties were inevitably strengthened.

He was reading a bullet-pointed list of Zenith-312's defensive capabilities for the fourth time when the hardline vox buzzed.

'Agapito,' he answered.

His equerry replied. 'Commander Branne is here to see you.'

'Send him in,' said Agapito, and made an effort to look busy.

The door whispered open. Branne had come across from the *Avenger,* so wore his armour. Regulations demanded full battle gear during ship to ship transit while they were in an active warzone. But he had his helmet under his arm, the better to display his cocky smile.

'Good evening,' said Branne. 'Have you an embrace for your brother?'

Agapito was dressed in black trousers and a sleeveless tunic. His arms bulged with muscles studded with the silvery wink of nerve shunt ports. His pale skin was shadowed by subcutaneous black carapace. When he stood and clasped Branne's armoured chest to his, it was like hugging a refrigeration unit. Branne stood back and gripped Agapito's shoulder.

'It has been too long. How have you fared without me to watch your back? Still alive, I see.'

'I am better for hearing that I took my target before you did today.'

Branne laughed. ‘I still took it.’

‘You have more than enough to brag about,’ said Agapito. ‘Allow me a moment of gloating.’

Branne shrugged. His pauldrons whined as they followed the motion. ‘All right, you win.’ He glanced around. ‘Have you done something to this place?’

‘My quarters are the same as they ever were.’

‘Are you sure?’ said Branne, looking about. ‘Something’s changed.’

Being commanders afforded the brothers large quarters. But although their rooms were not the monastic cells of their line warriors, Branne and Agapito were Space Marines still, and natives of Deliverance at that, so their private chambers were small and austere by the standards of Imperial lords. There was no facing on the plasteel walls to disguise the ship’s structure. No marble, or treated rockcrete, wood or granite as could be found aboard the ships of other Legions. The alloy’s dark grey undercoat was unpainted. The lumens and every other device were purely functional. There were no artistic flourishes, and precious little light. Four objects decorated the room. Agapito’s rarely worn dress armour stood to attention in a glass case, shining with inlay and decorative engraving so fine it was barely visible on the black ceramite. There was his bolter at rest on a plain stand by his desk. The desk itself was the only thing of obvious non-Kiavahran make, being of rich woods and gloriously carved. Lastly was a collection of the commander’s art. Miniature engravings executed on tiny pieces of silver stood ranked with military precision in a matt-black shelving unit. Under magnification, they were marvellous landscapes of the worlds Agapito had visited in his career, forty-nine thus far. To the unaided eye they were small squares of bright metal.

‘This is new,’ Branne said, patting the desk. ‘Pretty big.’

‘It was a showpiece, made on Varva for the Star Giants.’

‘I was not there for that one,’ said Branne. ‘I did not know the compliance came with furniture.’

‘The Varvans believed in a race of giants that would descend from the heavens and bring them into the light,’ said Agapito. ‘They built palaces in anticipation. The whole planet is littered with ruins built over centuries.’ He paused for a moment. The world had affected him. ‘They put so much effort into their creations. There was so much hope in their offerings.’ He smiled ruefully. ‘Though, until the day the star giants actually came, they were perfectly happy to go about murdering each other over what kind of embellishments the star giants might like on their cornices.’

Branne shook his head. ‘The galaxy is an ocean of madness.’

‘Well, at least it was an easy compliance.’ Agapito placed a bowl of fruit and

two plain cups of metal on his desk.

‘I remember,’ Branne said. ‘That was when I was out in the Chavai Salient, winning the *Avenger*.’

The assignment of a battle-barge to Branne’s direct command rankled with Agapito a little, in that humorous, not-humorous way envy can strike at brothers. Technically the resources under Agapito’s command were larger, but Branne’s battle-barge carried prestige Agapito’s cruisers did not. The Raven Guard were not known for jests. Branne still enjoyed teasing his brother.

‘You would have to remind me of that,’ said Agapito.

‘As long as you are jealous I will continue to do so,’ said Branne. ‘And you *are* still jealous.’

‘I am still jealous,’ admitted Agapito. ‘Shall I call someone to remove your armour?’

Branne shook his head. ‘I cannot stay long, brother.’

‘A little while is better than no time. Do you want a drink?’

‘Why not?’ said Branne.

‘Do you think,’ Agapito asked, as he poured out the contents of a small aluminium flask into two mugs, ‘that it is going to work?’

‘Corvus’ plan?’ said Branne. He frowned. ‘He has never let us down before.’ He took a nip of the liquor and pulled a face halfway between appreciative and appalled. The old prison techniques for distilling alcohol had been refined, but old tastes died hard. ‘That’s exactly as rough as it should be.’

‘Drink enough of this, and it will get you drunk, even now,’ said Agapito with a glint in his eye.

‘You sound like Nathian,’ said Branne.

‘Not me,’ said Agapito. He took a drink. ‘Do you think it will work? Will they capitulate if we take Zentith-Three-One-Two?’

Branne looked uneasy. ‘I am uncomfortable questioning Corax, even in private with you.’

‘What is the point in being commanders if we follow orders blindly?’ said Agapito.

‘Well,’ said Branne reluctantly. ‘They will not fall for the same trick again. Whichever way we do this, we are in for a hard fight. If Corvus’ plan works, it offers the best outcome for the rapid integration of this system into the Imperium, with the lowest casualties and the least damage to its material structure.’

‘That is a given,’ said Agapito. ‘But what if it does not work? We will be stuck here for months, fighting a well-organised enemy.’ He drained his cup and gasped. Space Marine physiology could take most toxins in its stride, but penal liquor, enhanced by mankind’s finest minds, set it a challenge.

‘It better work then,’ said Branne.

‘Did you see his face when they destroyed their own city? He hid it, but he was appalled. He is getting too caught up in all this. We have never rested, not since the Emperor came. Straight from the rebellion into enhancement, then the crusade. He had it worse. Even he has to have limits. He has been tested. He is going to go too far to prove himself.’

‘What are you driving at, brother?’

Agapito’s line of thought was borderline sedition, but it came from the heart. Before Corax had become their gene-father, he had been their friend. ‘He has too much to prove – that enlightenment works, that the Imperium can be compassionate, that war can be bloodless, that tyrants must fall and, over all, that the Emperor’s way is the right way.’

‘Are you saying the Emperor’s plan is not for the best?’ said Branne carefully.

‘What do you think?’ said Agapito with a frown. ‘Obviously it is the right way. The crusade is everything, but we hold back sometimes when other Legions do not, for fear of hurting the innocent. I am proud of that fact. But this is one of those times where we should not. Admiral Fenc thinks Corax is wrong. He was shaking with fury when he left yesterday’s briefing.’

‘I saw,’ said Branne. ‘But there is no other viable plan.’

‘There is Fenc’s plan, of attacking en masse now,’ said Agapito. ‘I ask you, brother, what if the attack on Zenith-Three-One-Two goes wrong? What then? By then, it will be too late. Fenc might be right.’

Branne set down his empty cup. ‘Brother, it will not go wrong.’

The hardline buzzed again, preventing further discussion. Agapito’s equerry was shouting at someone. The door opened. A legionary in full armour stepped inside.

‘I am sorry, brother-commander,’ said Agapito’s equerry. ‘He would not listen. I will remove him.’

‘Wait,’ said Agapito. ‘What are you doing here, Pexx?’ He stood from the table.

‘Brother-commander,’ said Pexx. ‘I must speak with you now.’

‘Pexx?’ said Branne. ‘Fedann Pexx? It is good to see you.’

Pexx looked sidelong at Branne. It was a furtive look, bizarre when performed by a Space Marine in battleplate.

‘I will come back later,’ Pexx said quietly. ‘I am sorry to interrupt.’

‘You are here now,’ said Agapito. ‘You know my brother. What is wrong?’

Pexx brought his hands up to his helm hesitantly.

‘It is this,’ he said. He unclasped his helm. He kept his face towards the ground, then slowly looked up.

His skin had gone a luminous white. His eyes had become black orbs of jet. In Corax's Legion, this change to resemble the primarch so long after apotheosis was no cause for joy.

'Emperor's throne, Pexx!' said Agapito. 'Your behaviour during the attack was strange, I thought, but this…'

'Sable brand,' said Branne. 'How long?'

'A week,' said Pexx. The revelation of his condition prompted an outpouring. 'I could not hide it any longer. The thoughts, commanders… Death, everywhere. And the sorrow. I have never experienced such misery.' The usually bold Pexx had gone, substituted for this shattered creature.

'You should rest. In a percentage of cases the dark humours pass without intervention,' said Agapito.

'A percentage?' asked Pexx.

'A small percentage,' said Branne.

Pexx drew in another wavering breath. 'That is not good enough.'

'Then you can fight,' said Branne. 'You will either banish the condition through effort, or you will die in service.'

'What do you want, Pexx?' asked Agapito gently.

'I do not know, my brothers.' Pexx's black eyes were haunted. 'My dreams are full of darkness. My waking hours are chill. Greyness covers everything.' He was ashamed. 'My only comfort is the thought of death. All I want to do is kill.' He looked in dismay between the two brothers. 'I am a warrior of the Emperor. I have slain thousands in the name of the Imperium, but these feelings, my lord…' He swallowed. 'They appal me. I am no murderer, and yet why do I feel the need to rend at my brothers? Please, my lords,' he said in tones of utter desperation. 'What am I to do?'

TEN

AN EYE FOR DESTRUCTION

Phelinia’s natural intelligence was compromised by her desire for revenge. If she had been operating entirely from a position of rationality, she would have been nowhere near the bomb when it went off, but Phelinia was far too invested emotionally in liberty’s struggle for that. She wanted to see her tormentors suffer. She wanted to push the button herself and see the bright fires consume those she hated.

A bureaucrat’s office high up a tower gave her an unparalleled view to the square. The staff of the building were out for the parade, so she would not be discovered. From the other end of the long street Corax’s statue stared at her knowingly, like he was in on her secret.

Hundreds of thousands of people crowded the pavements and spilled into the carriageway. Traffic was suspended for the day. Work was restricted to a single shift for all but the most essential workers. At this little taste of freedom the people were ecstatic, waving their flags and cheering when there was nothing yet to see. Kiavahr and Deliverance had long been joyless worlds. Three decades on from the revolution, their peoples were only now learning to enjoy themselves. Their happiness was genuine but rooted in ignorance. They had nothing to be happy about, no real liberty, no real pleasures, no joy beyond waking to find they got to breathe for another day. They had been gulled by their masters with paper flags, promises of a future that would never be delivered and a moment’s release from the drudgery of work.

‘Pitiful,’ Phelinia breathed.

Simplistic music bleated down the street canyons of Kravv and a swelling cheer greeted the approaching procession. Marching bands at the fore swung around the base of the statue and passed through Liberty Square.

The bands turned onto the crowded road and headed directly towards her, their cheap, mass-produced instruments doggedly mangling a selection of Terran martial songs. Yet for all their pasteboard hats and cheap tawdry, they marched proudly down the road in tight formation.

As the bands passed the crowds they cheered louder, all but drowning out the blare and thump of the music. Behind them walked Therion soldiers, and a contingent of Mechanicum cyborg troops, their scarlet uniforms and polished brass components bright in Kiavahr’s grey day. Phelinia didn’t care for them. Her eyes were fixed further down the procession, watching for the politicals.

No tech-guilder of any real consequence took part in the parade. None of the ruling class was that stupid. The marchers were low-ranking officials, young guilders yet to gain good office, or the members of weaker families. Their lowly position was irrelevant to her. They were still guilders playing the game of power with other people’s lives.

By now the front ranks of the guilders’ number were walking past the statue. Phelinia raised her magnoculars to get a better look. The guilders walked rather than marched, some of the younger ones tossing out strictly rationed handfuls of chocanade sweets from baskets carried by servants. They waved and laughed. She let them enjoy half a second more of their lives.

‘Detonate,’ she whispered into her collar.

A long fist of fire punched out of the lumen tree. The metal shaft broke and the tree turned suddenly and heeled over, like a clown miming a fainting fit. She smiled at the dark shapes of bodies carried off in the blast. The explosion was an instantaneous pleasure, a singular, sharp release that was all too brief and gone as soon as the flames. A ball of smoke and dust rose over the square, borne aloft on the force of screams.

There was no music now.

A front of dust rolled down the road. Phelinia was left disappointed she could see nothing of the aftermath through its roil.

Corax’s bronze face looked blindly at the carnage. It saw nothing of the shattered bodies, nor the crowds stampeding in their panic. It did not see a woman leave an office building and slip away into the confusion.

A perimeter of interlinked riot shields ringed the blast site, each backed by an anonymous shock trooper.

Enforcer-Principal Diorddan Tensat halted before them. They stared

resolutely over his head, shields locked. He frowned.

Muttering blackly to himself, he fished out a double-headed eagle badge from his long coat and held it up to be scanned. The shock-group leader emerged from behind the wall of shields to inspect it. His high white helmet was already coated by the settling dust.

‘Enforcer-Principal Diorddan Tensat,’ said Tensat.

A lens unit hovered up from the shock-group leader’s comms pack on the end of a flexible cable. Low-intensity las light stuttered and blasted the badge, activating the holo-glyphs within. Marks of authority scrolled sideways through the air partway between the two men, then coyly slid out of view.

‘My apologies for keeping you waiting, sir, security here must be tight.’

Tensat grunted testily.

The shock-troop leader stepped aside. His men opened up their shields and closed them smoothly as he passed within.

The enforcer-principal glanced back. Idiots, he thought. His uniform, badge and face were known to all of them.

The procurator mechanical was already there, his grav motors buzzing as he floated over the devastation and plucked at debris that caught his many glass eyes. Multi-jointed limbs darted down in undulating sequence, like a machine harvester, or a spider weaving a web.

Tensat was restricted to the limbs he was born with. He relied on the time-honoured locomotion of boots pushing against the ground, and so was forced to pick his way through the gobbets of human flesh littering the blasted-up rockcrete like so many moist, red flowers.

He got it on his boots. It clung to the soles. He was cursing and flicking off the remains of some poor low-rank guilder when the procurator floated over, the smell of hot metal gusting from the exhaust ports hidden under his robes.

‘Enforcer-Principal Tensat. You are finally here.’

‘I had a little difficulty getting through the cordon,’ Tensat grumbled.

‘They did not let you through?’ said the procurator emotionlessly. ‘They are your own men.’

The procurator had no name and no gender. In fact, Tensat was not sure if it was always the same person – he used the term loosely. Its synthetic voice was so devoid of emotion it was impossible to tell what it was thinking. He hated dealing with the Mechanicum. Discourse with them was stripped of all subtext. It was worse than communicating by vox-text. He had decided to ascribe a smug, superior tone to it some time ago. It seemed to fit.

‘Having me flash my credentials was a show for the public,’ he said, defensive now his organisation was criticised by an outsider.

‘The site is secure. That is a positive input.’ Throughout their conversation

the procurator continued to pluck repetitively at the ground. It had no staff, but was accompanied by a swarm of assistant servo-skulls. Tensat was alone. He preferred it that way, and would have been happier if the procurator were not there, but circumstances of government dictated their cooperation.

‘Too little, too late,’ muttered Tensat. ‘Where was security before the damn bomb went off?’

‘The area was swept one hour before the parade,’ said the procurator. ‘Nothing was found.’

‘How well was it swept?’ asked Tensat.

‘Your men performed the duty, not mine.’

Tensat shook his head. He hunched into his long coat and looked around the square. The power in that sector had been shut off and nearby manufactoria evacuated. Without the constant heat generated by Kiavahr’s industry, the planet’s natural chill was free to assert itself.

‘It was in the lumen tree,’ he said. He pointed at the space until recently occupied by the sculpture.

‘An obvious conclusion, but correct,’ said the procurator.

‘Wasn’t it inspected during the security sweep?’

‘I refer you to my earlier comment, enforcer-principal.’

‘It was checked though?’

‘Affirmative.’

‘And the last time?’ Tensat looked around the square. ‘By the Emperor’s coming, such devastation. This is military-grade explosives, has to be.’

Something clicked in the procurator’s skull. ‘City cogitators record the last hatch opening to have been seventeen days, four hours and twelve minutes ago for routine maintenance. It is my hypothesis that the device was planted after this.’

‘Sensors can be deceived.’

‘So can your men,’ said the procurator.

Tensat scowled. He ducked a servo-skull. Delicate metal pincers jutted out where once a human tongue had spoken, bearing a bloody sample bag. He picked his way across the ground to the edge of the crater. The bottom of the lumen tree had been atomised. The hole left was two metres deep and steeply conical. Carbonised material and chunks of rubble were laid out in neat radii around the hole. Close by, the material was pulverised. Larger pieces lay around it, mainly slabs of rockcrete heaved up by the blast, then fist-sized lumps scattered from the hole, graded by distance down to the fine dust plastering the facades of the buildings around the square. The debris field was roughly elliptical with ragged edges, the result of differing densities in the material destroyed, or maybe evidence of a shaped charge. But it was regular.

Physics was remarkably fastidious.

Tensat peered into the crater. The city foundation was thick. Kravv was built on a floating skin of rockcrete over ancient mining pits, and the blast had done no more than dent the substrate. Fused optical fibres still glowed in the pit, the light intended for the lumen tree bleeding off into dusty air.

‘From the look of it, the bomb was pushed into the optics piping, out of sight but within reach. Didn’t they think to check deeper inside?’

‘Negative. Cursory would be my definition of the security sweep,’ said the procurator.

Tensat twisted his mouth. Today he would not rise to the procurator’s jibes. ‘A metre down. Perhaps more. A powerful bomb. It’s a deep hole.’

‘It is my opinion,’ said the procurator, ‘that the perpetrator wished to inflict maximum damage while avoiding large amounts of incidental casualties.’

‘Fifty-six people died in the crowd,’ said Tensat. ‘That is the definition of a large amount.’

‘Nevertheless, the target was the guild marchers. There are a number of alternative placings for an explosive device in this area. All would have increased the casualty rate significantly.’

‘It’s all murder.’ Tensat scanned over the ruined flesh stuck to the ground. ‘I don’t know why they’re gunning for the likes of them. These poor bastards are the lowest of the low.’

‘I surmise that the suspect would regard them as a valid target. The guilds are the target.’

The procurator chugged away and began plucking at another area.

‘Why?’ Tensat called after it. ‘Why don’t they bomb you? There’s more than a few people believe that the Mechanicum is responsible for their misery.’

The procurator swivelled serenely on the spot, its ribbed arms still snatching at the ground and secreting pieces of the truth about itself. Flinders of bone and rubble went into pouches brought by its grisly servants.

‘We seek maximum efficiency. Happiness is not a relevant calculational factor.’

‘There are other parties who believe your priesthood is destabilising the guilds itself,’ said Tensat.

‘That is nonsensical. If Mars wished to be rid of the tech-guilds, there are other ways. If the people seek blame, they should look to the primarch. The Imperial Hegemony, at Lord Corax’s request, granted suzerainty over Kiavahr to the Mechanicum only if the existing power structure were retained beneath our governance. It is an arrangement that suits us well. The guilds are native. We are not. Smooth interfacing of Mechanicum/non-Mechanicum peoples is better assured by continued guild presence. Though inferior in most

capacities, the guilds have access to technology we lack. We do not wish to lose it through purge.’

Tensat walked over the uneven ground. ‘Yes, but they are not sharing that technology.’

‘Are you accusing the Mechanicum of impropriety?’ queried the procurator. ‘Actions of this sort are a breach of our treaty terms for overlordship of this world.’

‘I’m not accusing you of anything,’ said Tensat. ‘For what it’s worth, I don’t think it’s your kind, priest. This is something else. There’ve been a dozen murders–’

‘I suggest assassinations,’ said the procurator. ‘The motive here is political.’

‘Assassinations, then. A dozen of them. Sabotage of guild holdings, remote attacks on datanets. This is a campaign. Why aren’t there any demands?’

‘There are,’ said a deep, inhuman voice. A legionary stepped out of the shadow around Corax’s statue. One moment, there was nothing there. The next, two metres of transhuman warrior clad in ceramite was bearing down on him.

Tensat started. His shock would have been profound had he not witnessed the Raven Guard’s uncanny stealth many times before.

His unobtrusive rank badges suggested this was no line trooper, but someone of importance. Bad news. Tensat shut his mouth before he could be accused of gawping. ‘I was about to say we need to sort this out before the Legion gets involved.’

‘I would say that it is too late for that,’ said the legionary.

ELEVEN

ANOTHER WAY OF WAR

The Raven Guard attacked Zenith-312 in full battle array. Lines of cruisers sailed forward of the main advance openly, took up position and methodically annihilated Zenith-312's swarms of kill-sats. The sidelined Fenc watched helplessly from the command deck of the *Song-he*, his fleet reduced to providing a protective umbrella to the Raven Guard ships against the weapons fire of other cities. The Thousand Moons would not reach optimal positions for cooperative bombardment for weeks. The projectiles they shot out by the thousand were easy to track and down before they came anywhere near either Imperial fleet, but the particle, graviton and las-beams snapping out from their energy weapon arrays struck instantly, playing in flickering tongues of man-made lightning all over the fleets' formations. Interposed between the cities and the Legion, the Twenty-Seventh Expeditionary Fleet took the worst of it. Coruscating void shields formed an arc of purple, green and yellow field glare that lit up the black of space for hundreds of thousands of kilometres.

There was little for Fenc to do but observe and prepare for an enemy breakout. His gunnery captains put out an endless stream of anti-munitions missiles and pinpoint las strikes. Tocsins rang out the depletion of ammunition. The officers had everything in hand, redirecting resources as necessary, ordering minor shifts in fire corridors to compensate for turrets that needed to cool down or required resupply. On fifty other ships, the same was occurring, bold shipmasters stood in inactivity while their crews performed their duty. The engagement lighting was active, red and threatening, but the

steady murmur of orders and requests was calm. Despite the roiling storm of light across the voids, there was no immediate danger.

Fenc had two hololiths active before his command throne. One showed a representational system view, the other a true-pict feed of Corax's attack. Within the representational orb, the Thousand Moons tracked through space, the ellipses and circles of their usual orbits spiralling out of shape as they repositioned. The Sodality ships held back, waiting to redeploy should Fenc's fleet launch an attack on a second moon. The Twenty-Seventh faced them in stalemate. Fenc could not do anything or the Sodality would bring pressure to bear on the primarch's Legion. The Sodality vessels could not advance without presenting themselves to the Twenty-Seventh's guns.

The admiral imagined his opposite numbers on the Carinaean warships staring at similar displays and thinking similar thoughts. Thousands of years of divergent development separated their cultures, but it was amazing how little most human civilisations had drifted from their roots. There were extremes, but though in absolute terms wildly divergent branches of the human family tree were numerous, they were a small percentage of Terra's far-flung seeds. Most men were recognisably men. They felt, thought and fought like any human being. There was commonality between them. Empathy was inevitable.

Fenc willed Corax's plan to succeed. It would be far better if the fleet of the Sodality were to enter the service of the Emperor rather than be reduced to debris. Like Corax, he would prefer the Carinaeans be breathing Imperial citizens than dead enemies.

For the same reasons, Fenc knew the plan would not work. Corax's awesome display of power was intended to show stealth was not his sole ability. It would only stiffen the resolve of their enemies. For Corax, the benefits of the Great Crusade were self-evident. The Ravenlord had been brought up by political dissidents. He was an idealist. He could not comprehend why these people would hold out in the face of overwhelming odds when there was a self-evidently better way of life available. He saw only the Emperor's Truth. Fenc had a sense Corax found it hard to engage sympathetically with enemies who thought differently. He did not understand that truth is subjective, not an absolute. It was the primarch's weakness. There was no way that the rest of the Thousand Moons would surrender, whatever happened to Zenith-312.

None of this could be said out loud, not to his most trusted advisors or to his closest friends. The greatest burden of command was the maintenance of appearances. Holding his tongue galled him as he watched Corax's fleet power through the failing energy shields of Zenith-312 and, like seeds shed from grass by the thousands, disgorge the landing parties of the Raven Guard.

Flotillas of boarding torpedoes, gunships and assault rams poured through clouds of neutralised kill-sats while black warships kept up a steady bombardment on the city’s main gun emplacements.

The end of Zenith-312 had begun.

Thunder and fury came at the behest of black-clad murderers. Terminator-armoured Deliverers deployed in mass drop-ship assault to seize the city’s outer docking rings. This initial action was over quickly. In their wake Corax’s army poured aboard Zenith-312 by the thousand, killing as they went. Orders were given to preserve the lives of the civilians, but in such a furious assault it was certain innocents would suffer, and thousands died. Armoured vehicles ploughed through hab-zones and parks. Fires burned in arboreta. Captive seas drained from broken tanks.

Zenith-312 had its share of beauty. On the sharp edge of the war it was destroyed. The Imperium gave its judgement in flame and death.

While static battle lines formed to hold the docks, hunting cadres of the Raven Guard dispersed into the deeper city. The defence forces of Zenith-312 were numerous, but in the face of the Legiones Astartes they had little chance of survival, and certainly none of victory. Wherever the forces clashed, the Sodality was swept aside in short order, ceramite boots pounding past bolt-shattered bodies as the Legion swept on.

Within an hour of the assault’s commencement, half the city was under Imperial control. Soon after that the voidward inner docks were taken by a second, surprise landing, giving the Legion a foothold around all the city’s periphery.

The landing of the Therion Cohort could begin.

A lightly armed drop-ship roared into a sunward hangar. Roaring plasma jets blasted up wreckage made during the taking of the docks. The ship put down beside a shattered refuelling gantry, its ramp slammed down into a slick of spreading promethium, and the allies of the Raven Guard rushed out. Four squads of well-equipped human breacher troops broke from neat ranks and dispersed across the hangar to form a protective cordon.

Praefector Caius Valerius believed in leading from the front. His boots touched the riven deck as the last of the boarding party were still in motion. If his aides had not insisted otherwise, he would have led the first wave himself.

Valerius halted in the middle of the deck. Soldiers were streaming out of his lander and forming up around their officers in neat ranks. Wrecked enemy void craft occupied more than half the landing pads. There were bodies everywhere, most of them violently dissected by volkite beams. Hot metal smoke scented the air. Fires guttered in several places. Holes riddled the

walls, the characteristics of each revealing the weapon that had inflicted it. Meltas left runnels of metal. Lascannons drilled neat, precise holes surrounded by carbon starbursts. Plasma left round holes where explosive sunburst shots had hit, long scores where plasma streams had played across the walls.

A second lander blasted in from outside, wavered over a debris-choked landing pad and put down gingerly amid shattered baffle panels and piles of sparking cables. Insulation fibres and bits of wadding blew up into whirlwinds.

There was a long traffic control gallery overlooking the hangar whose windows ran the full depth of the dock from void to the inner wall. Some of its protective shutters were jammed closed, the rest were up. Behind glass crazed with weapons impacts moved huge armoured figures out of scale with the duty stations inside. A couple of the windows were blown out. Smoke from extinguished fires smudged the walls

‘Milontius!’ Caius called for his manservant. ‘With me!’

‘Yes, praefector.’ A short man trotted down the ramp. He was dressed in the uniform of an officer, but without badges of rank. He carried two lasguns on his shoulder. A large bag containing the praefector’s effects dangled from his right hand.

‘The Legion waits for us. I’m going to get our orders. You’re coming too.’

‘Yes, praefector,’ said Milontius.

Caius forged across the buckled deck plates, Milontius in tow.

A lone legionary stood sentry at an open door. He waved Caius and Milontius through. A run of stairs led up to the observation deck.

The damage to the traffic control deck was worse than it appeared from the outside. Half the lumens were broken. Dying machinery vomited sparks. A dead legionary, his thorax and throat armour cracked by a reductor, lay on the ground. Flechettes studded his amour with a forest of needles. A dozen dead Carinaeans paid the price for the loss of this one Raven Guard. They lay about in various attitudes of death, their long, spindly arms outflung, jaws slack, eyes open. Frag grenades had killed most, bolt-rounds the rest. Collateral blast damage had destroyed much of the machinery. In the confines of the deck the smell of hot metal blended sickeningly with ruptured guts and drying blood. Caius covered a cough with a fist to his mouth. He would have pulled up his rebreather but did not wish to appear weak before his men, so breathed lightly through his mouth.

Three legionaries were in the room. Though the deck was large, it was cluttered with desks and monitoring equipment. The spaces the Carinaeans inhabited were oddly proportioned, tall but narrow, and the gaps between the

room’s consoles were tight. The Space Marines’ armour banged into something every time they moved.

‘Captain,’ said Caius, calling to their leader.

‘You are the praefector’s representative?’ asked the captain.

Caius did not recognise the voice. Captains came, fought, died and were replaced, and there were scores of them in the Legion. ‘I *am* the praefector,’ he said. He drew himself up a little. According to their relative hierarchies, Valerius outranked the legionary.

‘My apologies,’ said the captain. He did not introduce himself but launched straight into instructions.

He has to be new, thought Caius, to speak to me this way.

‘My company will move out now you are here. In thirty-six minutes the first of the civilians evacuated from district nine-zero-three will arrive. There is heavy engagement with the enemy in that sector.’ The sector would have had a local name. All the planets, towns and bases taken by the Great Crusade did. Terran forces had no time to learn them. Imperial holdings grew so quickly numbers had to suffice. ‘There is warehousing in the levels below,’ continued the captain. ‘I recommend that these are used to house the civilian population while the fighting is ongoing. This hangar and its attendant stores are separate from the rest. There’s only a single loading door. Easy to keep them in. They need to be processed. Officials, military, anyone with any influence. You are to prepare a perimeter first, and then move on to vetting the civilians.’

That settled it. The captain was new. Caius was seventy years old. He’d done this dozens of times. Therion proverbs about respecting your elders, and a few choice curses, flitted through his mind. ‘I am aware of the process, captain.’

The captain caught a little of Caius’ annoyance, and modified his tone. ‘Of course. I trust you will see it is done.’

‘Indeed. What about food and water for these people? How many can I expect?’

‘A few thousand, I think. There is a reservoir tank nearby. Food they will have to wait on. With the primarch, this battle will be over soon and they should be able to return to their homes. Tell them that.’

Caius nodded. ‘Hearts and minds.’

‘We will win both of those,’ said the captain. ‘Minimal casualties. Good treatment for any detainees.’ He sounded like he was reminding himself, thought Caius.

‘Where is the primarch?’ asked Caius.

‘You have known him a long time?’ asked the captain.

‘Since the Therion Cohort pledged themselves to him, yes, I have.’ Longer than you, he added to himself.

‘Then you need not ask. He is where he always is. He is hunting.’

Corax ran ahead of his army far into the city. He clung to the shadows, dashing past surveillance devices, disabling those he could not hide from.

Human eyes were easy to deceive. Among the many wondrous gifts the Emperor had blessed Corax with was the gift of hiding in plain sight. Some innate ability, psychic in nature, Corax surmised, blocked out his presence from the minds of humans and most xenos. If he concentrated, he would fade from their perceptions until he was invisible. This power had come to his notice while he was young in the prison warrens of Lycaeus. At first it had been hard to keep his focus up, but his facility had grown with time. Now he could maintain his shrouding gift while he killed his bewildered enemies. They could not see him even then, their bodies torn asunder while they looked in terror for the phantom slaughtering them.

Corax was by nature an independent thinker, preferring to do his own work; not a general, but a warlord. His men were encouraged to think for themselves, partly so Corax was free of directing them. Often, he operated alone. His Legion’s actions were often little more than a cover for his own, decisive strike. So it was on Zenith-Three-One-Two.

Corax intended to capture Arch-Comptroller Agarth himself.

With him went a dozen others with the same, uncanny power. The Shadowmasters, the Mor Deythan in the Kiavahran tongue, were a tiny proportion of the Legion who, by a quirk of the gene-seed derived from his primarch’s body, had inherited Corax’s knack for invisibility.

Nobody saw them. Nobody stopped them. They jogged down abandoned corridors and through barracks full of soldiery scrambling to repel the Raven Guard assault. They were not seen, no matter how crowded the places they went. Outliers dealt with pict-units, auguries and auspexes where necessary, for machines could not be tricked. The enemy were too occupied to investigate.

Being able to move freely through enemy territory gave Corax a unique perspective on war. He had stood in the command centres of enemy generals whose occupants argued forcibly about the best way to kill him. He had walked down trench lines of troops trembling with fear at the thought of facing his sons. People behaved differently when they thought they were unobserved. Such secret insight into the minds of men he had. Such awful things he could have done, were he blacker of heart.

There remained an uneasiness deep in his soul at the gift he possessed. He suppressed it. While the ability was useful, and its purpose clear, he did not like to question its provenance.

Corax followed a cartolith pieced together from deep auspex soundings of the city. There had been no need to hide their scans this time. Agarth knew they were coming.

He turned into an industrial processing zone the equal in dirt and poverty of any found on old Lycaeus. It was dark, thunderous and rank. Even now, in the midst of an enemy attack, the giant machines worked, reprocessing Zenith-Three-One-Two's organic waste into foodstuffs for its inhabitants. Waterfalls of filth thundered through tiered filtration scoops. Machines scraped a thick layer of algal scum off the surface of flotation pools and directed it into open chutes towards steaming pasteurisation machines. There were dead-eyed people everywhere, covered in dirt. Occupied by their tasks, they ignored the rumble of impacts quaking through the city's fabric. They had no protective equipment, but breathed in the unfiltered miasma, and let the muck splash onto their skin.

Corax ran alongside three kilometres of parallel growth beds. The stench of human excrement pervaded everything. The canals terminated in an array of steaming pipes whose heads plunged under the green skin on the surface. Thick sludge bubbled around the tubes. Froth climbed into wobbling heaps.

Though they were invisible to other human eyes, Corax could see his twelve warriors ranging high and far through the recycling plant's structure. They were loners, like him. Corax's gift was kept from the wider Legion. Those who had it were separated as soon as it manifested and inducted into the Shadowmasters.

He passed under a bridge, skirting deep pools of bubbling urine being drawn into reclamation ovens. Streets of mean houses lit by green-flamed methane torches branched off to the right.

He saw his first overseer soon after.

Slavery had an economic cost for the slavers. Men were needed to watch over the oppressed. The man and the workers could all have been fighting the invaders. Their vile traditions drew valuable manpower from the defence. They would fall quicker for it.

The overseer paced back and forth on a bridge which had been built solely for the purposes of supervision over a wide settling tank that reeked of ammonia. He carried a slaver's gear: a whip, non-lethal sidearm, and one that was very much deadly. Short ladders led up to the platform.

Corax should have left him, but he couldn't. The overseer's simple being offended him. He leapt high.

The man spun around in alarm at Corax's impact. He saw nothing. A great weight had landed stealthily behind him, but to his eyes there was clear air behind him. Yet metal creaked, and the air moved. Corax had seen the look on

the man’s face so many times. Animal instincts told the overseer something huge and deadly came for him. Corax could smell his adrenaline.

‘Who goes there?’ he shouted. Fear played a tremolo in his voice.

Death was the answer. Corax lifted him high off the ground by his head, the mechanical fingers of his gauntlet wrapping all the way around his skull. The primarch held him so tightly he could not breathe nor speak. One hand clawed at the invisible grip, and he cried out soundlessly as his fingers, flailing, encountered a razored edge and were severed. They fell to the ground. Blood welled from the stumps.

The man was too shocked to feel the pain. He screamed as he was dangled over the tank.

Corax allowed himself to be seen. For a moment, he revelled in fear as his helmeted face appeared before the overseer.

‘No man has the right to take freedom from another,’ Corax said, in the argot of Carinae.

The primarch ripped the man’s guts out with his power claws, showering viscera into the tank and turning it red. He dumped the overseer, still alive and choking, into the waste. Hot, reeking liquid filled his empty abdominal cavity. He sank without a trace.

‘Justice,’ said Corax.

Frightened faces looked at the square housing the tank. Confronted by this alien monster, the people screamed and ran away. But one held fast. Whether she was frozen by fear or possessed of great courage mattered not to the primarch. To this woman Corax spoke gently.

‘I will free every one of you before this is done. I swear it, in my father’s name.’

A second creature clad in metal, smaller than the first, appeared by the giant’s side. They conferred in a language the woman did not comprehend.

The darkness blinked. The monsters were gone from mortal sight.

TWELVE

PROBLEMS OF MERCY

‘It’s down here,’ said the surgeon general. ‘I think it’s best you see for yourself.’ He led Caius and Milontius on down the stairs leading from the hangars to the warehouse.

The stairway emerged onto a companionway bolted to the wall high over the warehouse floor. A massive piston at full extension held up the cargo lifter, which currently formed a part of the floor of the loading dock above. The Therions had done their best to clear space, but the warehouse had been full, and the civilians were crammed into a small square in the middle walled in by cargo containers.

Fuggy heat hit a moist slap of sweat about Caius’ face. Thousands of Carinaeans crammed the warehouse. Caius was pleased with the way his men were handling the situation. The armed presence was unobtrusive, and they were being as helpful to the local population as they could be. But it was crammed and swamp-hot in there, and the people were understandably in dismay. A lesser man than Caius might have scorned them all. To his thinking, he had no right to. They had not declined compliance; that was their leaders’ fault. It would be a mistake to damn them for the decisions of their rulers. There was not always the luxury of making that distinction. Caius had seen thousands of innocents killed to realise the higher goal of unification, but where he had a chance to preserve life, he did.

He was allowed a moment’s calm.

‘Looks like everything is all right here,’ said Milontius.

‘Don’t say things like that, Milontius.’

‘Sir?’

‘Have you ever heard of tempting fate?’

‘I’m sorry, sir.’

Caius half expected something to immediately go wrong. The universe had an evil sense of humour. But the situation remained as it was. Groups of sorrowing people sat quietly together. Babies cried. Individuals in uniforms and luxurious clothes were singled out and led to the line of desks manned by Therions situated in front of the giant-toothed main cargo gate for questioning.

‘It’s hot in here,’ Caius said. ‘And stuffy.’

‘We’ve the same problem down here as we do in the hangar. That’s why I brought you down here.’ The surgeon general pointed to the large, inverted trumpets hanging down into the room at one side. Currents of refreshed air should have been blowing from them. They were quiet. ‘The air system’s offline all through our section. The mix is breathable for now, but it is going to be a problem,’ said the surgeon general. He checked the display on his arm-mounted diagnostic unit. ‘The carbon dioxide levels are rising.’

‘And it is the same in the other two warehouses?’ asked Caius. The heat was making him light-headed.

‘The ventilation systems for all of this level are offline,’ said the surgeon general. ‘It is as bad in the other two as it is in here, and it will soon affect the hangar. How long until we can move them back to their hab-zones?’

‘Not for some time,’ said Caius. ‘I have had no word from the primarch. The fighting continues in the sector these people are from.’ He folded his arms, and frowned at the problem. ‘No air.’ Caius shook his head. ‘All we have to do is keep these people breathing. Is that so damn hard? Station someone down here with some monitoring equipment. Let me know when the gas mix becomes dangerous. We can always move them to the hangar. Perhaps we might evacuate them to our ships.’

‘As you wish, sir,’ said the surgeon general. ‘I could show you the other warehouses.’

‘It won’t be necessary, Cordellus. Let’s go back and see how the repairs are getting on.’ Caius looked back down to the herd of humanity sweltering in the warehouse. ‘We have taken their homes. We owe them our haste.’

Hangar Four, where Caius based his command, was less of a mess than it had been. The debris had been cleared away by teams of void pioneers soon after his arrival. The hangar space sparkled to the hot, metal dance of plasma torches cutting apart the remainder of the fallen gantries. The bodies in the

hangar and in the control room had been removed, and it smelled a lot less like death despite the lack of atmospheric circulation. Physically, the complex was in a far better shape than when Caius had taken it on. But the impression was misleading. The malfunctioning air system below was just the start. Nothing was fully operational.

They had the Space Marines to thank for that. They struck with all the finesse of a hammer.

Caius' support staff were working hard to restore functionality to the control centre equipment. So far their efforts were fruitless.

'Most,' explained his chief technician, when they returned to the control room, 'is broken.' The technician was tense and covered in smuts.

'I can see it's broken,' said Caius. 'I know it's broken. It is why I called you in here to repair it. To, if you like, *unbreak* it.'

The technician shrank under Caius' sarcasm. 'We cannot get it all to work. We're lucky the atmospheric shielding is online.' He gestured vaguely at the hangar aperture where a view of the outer docking ring shimmered beyond blue energy fields. 'The Legion damaged a lot when they came in here.' He pointed to a number of consoles in turn. There was blood spatter on all of them, and holes from which electronic guts spilled. 'Life support, airflow, auto-repair, vox-systems. It's all screwed. Pardon my language,' he added hurriedly. 'We're close to getting some air movement in here, and in the upper part of the complex, but down there, in the warehouses.' He shrugged. 'Hours. Maybe days. Maybe never.'

'Shrugging is not an adequate solution,' said Caius. 'Is there an alternative to effecting repairs here? Are there not alternative control points?'

'We found one on the schematic. When we checked it out, we found it had taken a direct hit from a penetrator shell. There's a hole in the hull there now, nothing else. This is it. We can get Imperial units in here and plug them into the systems. The machinery is fine. It's all waiting for commands. It's the control system that's gone.'

'Then do it,' said Caius.

'I would have done so in the first place, sir. But repair seemed the quicker way. I had to try this first. Though this technology is proving difficult to mend, I don't think it's going to be easy to get an interface between their tech and ours. It'll take hours.'

'Longer than it has taken you to fail to repair it?'

'About as long, but we'll make it work this time,' he said. The technician was more disappointed in himself than Caius was.

'What about him?' Caius pointed past the technician. A Martian priest had recently been attached to his command. Why he'd had this bizarre character

foisted on his regiment baffled him. The priest squealed about on the tracks he had instead of legs, wafting smoke from burning oil at the consoles. ‘The magos. What by Terra is he doing?’

‘He’s conducting a purification ritual. He’s more concerned about the heathen ways of the Carinaeans disrespecting the machines than the damage the Legion caused.’

‘Meaning?’

‘I think it means he can’t get it to work either.’

A soft chime struck up from the observation deck’s atmospheric monitor, one of the few things that did work. Immediately, the trill of the command squad’s auspex equipment joined it.

‘Pathogen in the air outside this sector!’ barked Cordellus.

‘Marvellous.’ Caius calmly fastened the rebreather about his mouth. His command squad did the same. ‘What’s the exposure?’

‘For us, negligible. There’s not enough airflow through here.’ The surgeon general looked them all over. ‘Anybody feel anything?’

Men patted themselves and looked at one another dumbly.

‘Let’s assume for a moment we’re all fine,’ said Caius, ‘and consider what is going to happen to everyone else, because we’re the only squad in this company wearing breathing equipment. What are we dealing with?’

The surgeon general consulted equipment. Reports were streaming in from elsewhere.

Cordellus frowned. ‘It’s an engineered virus of some sort. I won’t know what its effects are unless I take a sample back with me. But it’s aggressive. Very aggressive.’ He peered closer at the screen. ‘We should be all right in here. If it gets in, I recommend goggles. The sort of activity this is exhibiting, air contact alone could dump enough of a viral load through our eyes.’

‘Delightful,’ said Caius, seating his goggles in place. ‘Lock it out,’ he ordered. He turned back to the technician. ‘Get air purification back online. Prioritise it.’

‘Before the airflow?’ asked the technician.

‘Yes before!’ snapped Caius. ‘What’s the use of purifying the air after we let it back in? Bring it up to maximum. I want regular reports from the camps to see if the civilians are affected. And see if you can get that Martian to be of some use.’

‘Do you think they would poison their own civilians?’ asked Milontius.

‘You’re young. I’m old. I’ve seen every form of barbarity man can perform. Yes, I think they might poison their own civilians. Don’t worry, Milontius,’ said Caius sourly. ‘They’ll probably suffocate first.’

THIRTEEN

ANIMA-PHAGE

The gilded blister of Agarth’s palace dominated the city hub. The dozen avenues dividing the artificial moonlet’s districts met in a plaza beneath the palace’s baroque underside. Thus exalted over all, the arch-comptroller’s private domain crowned Zenith-312.

Corax advanced along a service catwalk suspended high above one of the avenues. The walkway was broad enough for the city’s large maintenance drones to traverse. Ten men could comfortably walk upon it abreast between the lattice of cables that hung the walkway from the city’s roof. An access shaft moulded into the fluid forms of the ceiling supports lay dead ahead of him, its concealed door leading back into station skin. A second was some four hundred metres behind his position.

The avenue was impressively large, accommodating parkland and a town of some size. Down the centre, a track for autonomous transit pods ran on pillars through the quiet glades and public gardens. Rich buildings stood alone in the park, gathering in number until they became streets, then packed ever more densely until they blended into the structure of the city’s massive internal walls. Woods dotting the park grew up the sides of the buildings in lush tangles, all Terran species, some extinct upon the world of man’s birth. At one point a lake filled the avenue from side to side, its deep blue waters crossed by the pod line. Sinuous walkways wound their way over marshes full of birds. Corax cast eyes over a living world unto itself, a cosmic oasis adrift upon the void. The myriad stars of space shone through faceted domes too big

to shutter that rose up at the high points in the roof like the triumphant notes of a symphony. This paradise was the home of the elite. The squalor Corax had witnessed elsewhere seemed a thousand light years away.

The plaza beneath Agarth's palace was equally impressive, its patterned paving adorned with graceful sculptures. Through its monumental precincts, the long, pollen-hazed distances of other avenues were visible.

The beauty of Zenith-312 was the equal of any constructed environment Corax had seen elsewhere, but presently it was crammed with refugees hiding from the war. There were tens of thousands of them, many ragged and out of place in their lush surroundings. They gathered most tightly towards the giant plaza as if their lord could personally protect them. Down the avenue, back towards the front, the power was out, and though the dark zone was as safe as the lit area the people huddled instinctively away from it.

The domes in the ceiling provided a panorama of the battle to the civilians. They watched the dance of warships transfixed, fear writ plainly on every face.

Corax cursed Agarth for corralling his people so close to himself. He erected a shield of innocent lives around his palace. The primarch loathed him all the more for that.

Then the people began to die.

Death came to the edge of the crowd first. Primarchs were possessed of acuity of vision far beyond that of a normal man, and Corax noticed odd movements among the people as soon as they began. He slowed his advance, and looked directly down at a wide meadow two hundred metres below.

The movement emanated from atmospheric venting ducts hidden in the landscape. People closest to the vents began to choke and shriek. Shock grew swiftly into a panic that moved outward like the ripples kissed into a field of wheat by the wind. The metaphor was not a natural one to the prison-raised Corax. The first time he had seen crops growing outside was not so long ago. But what he saw looked like nothing else but the pattern in long grasses. People surged one way, saw the same choking death coming from another direction, and surged back, their arms waving over their heads. It was momentarily hypnotic, until they began to fall. Nervous chatter burst into a roar of screaming, and the crowd broke in every direction.

Alarms rang in Corax's helm. Short vox bursts bounced from man to man in the dispersed cadre of Shadowmasters. He clicked out a code burst, bringing them all to a halt.

'There is something in the atmospheric mix,' he said, braving open broadcast. Pipes crowded the space over the service way. Funnels every eighty metres wheezed out air, interspersed intakes huffing it back in. He

flicked through the viewing options provided by his auto-senses. High-spectrum vision revealed a carrier agent billowing out of the vents in sinister clouds. The gas was but the bearer of bad tidings.

It carried the worst news of all.

‘Viral agent! Close down your breathing masks!’ Corax commanded. ‘Switch to vacuum operation protocols.’ More chimes sang in his helm.

People in a crowd are motes of information. They lose their individuality, becoming particles as predictable as those oscillating through a liquid. They stampeded away from the rings of death spreading out through their number in inevitable patterns. They shoved, bounced off each other and crushed those that fell down in their rush to escape. The greater battle in the heavens was forgotten.

Hundreds fled up the avenue, streaming into the dark like sand through the neck of an hourglass. But the disease was quickly diffused through the whole of the space. Corax saw it through his enhanced false-colour vision as a rolling, violet fog. There was no escape. The inhabitants of Zenith-312 fell as they ran, tongues swelling in their mouths, eyes rolling back. A lucky minority collapsed within three breaths. The rest fell in spasms, beating at their skulls at the agony sprouting inside, tearing at their own flesh and frothing from their mouths.

In seconds it was all over. The crowd collapsed into a pointillist mosaic of brightly coloured clothes, the figures tessellated by outflung limbs into disturbingly regular patterns.

One of the Mor Deythan broke the dreadful silence, his calm voice preceded by the crisp click of incoming vox traffic.

‘My lord, what are your orders?’ the Shadowmaster asked.

‘Essential communications only,’ Corax ordered. ‘We are vulnerable to detection.’ He walked forward, passing directly through the rush of contaminated air. His eyes darted across the crowd below. Every human being was dead. Anger flooded his soul.

‘What kind of tyrant murders his own people?’ said Corax to himself. ‘Why has he done this?’

Moments passed. The pulsing locator runes of his Mor Deythan moved silently over his helm cartograph.

‘My lord, there is some movement here among the dead,’ voxed one of the warriors. The name Dio Enkern blinked up in Corax’s helm. *‘Maybe survivors.’*

‘Investigate,’ Corax commanded. ‘The rest of you, stay in the shadows.’

Corax located Enkern moving through a square of bluish grassland. He darted from tree to tree, maximising his cover, then ran to the shelter of a

transit line pillar.

‘*Here,*’ Enkern voxed. He stopped at the edge of a group of people. Corax watched as he approached. Arms stirred. Legs jerked. Heads flopped. Enkern moved cautiously, his boltgun ready. Other movement drew Corax’s eye away. Across the sea of corpses, knots of similar activity stirred.

‘*I have life signs. Auto-senses show minimal heart patterns returning to normal,*’ voxed Enkern. He paused. ‘*Their hearts were still. Respiration and circulation restarting all around me. None of them are dead.*’

All across the crowds there were signs of life. A dread foreboding gripped Corax.

Enkern’s voxed shout drew Corax’s attention back to his son.

‘*Beware! They can see me.*’

A man was sitting up in the middle of the group. He stared at Enkern, trembling fingers lifted towards him. Corax frowned. It should not be possible. He linked with Enkern’s auto-senses to check. Stealing a look through his son’s eyes he saw it was true. The man *was* staring directly at the Shadowmaster. Others of the fallen people were getting to their feet, swaying unsteadily, all of them staring at the Mor Deythan. They bared their teeth. Hisses and snarls escaped their mouths.

‘*Stay back,*’ Enkern said. He repeated himself in Carinaean trade argot. More of the crowd were getting to their feet. Corax took in their glazed eyes and clashing teeth. He had never seen this before, but he had an inkling what it was.

‘Enkern, withdraw immediately,’ said Corax.

‘*Understood,*’ said Enkern. He began to fall back.

His suspicions aroused, the primarch engaged his armour’s higher-level cognitional functions. Corax’s wargear was individual to himself, equipped with unique subsystems that played to his strengths. Included in his sensorium were multiple auguries and analysis cogitators. His auto-senses tasted the disease on the air, sliced it to pieces, spelled out the nature written in its genetic code. Something complex and ancient. Something so evil it could only have come from the depths of man’s wickedness and refined at the heights of his power.

He cursed. ‘Anima-phage,’ he said in disgust. An ancient disease, programmed to rewrite a human’s brain, wiping out his higher functions and transforming him into an unreasoning beast.

‘All of you, withdraw. These people cannot be helped. They have become a danger to us. Keep your armour sealed.’

The gene-coding was bewilderingly complex, even to his primarch’s mind, and the data his battleplate presented was insufficient for him to decide if the

agent would affect his sons. He thought it probable. The Emperor's gene forging was supreme, but the genetors of the Age of Technology were master artisans of death.

Gunshots burst off to his right. Corax glanced down. One of his other men was moving through the crowd on the other side of the park. The afflicted were running at him. Where before he had walked unseen, now he was visible, and trapped. He moved rapidly towards the sanctuary of a building, barging through the crowd where he could, letting off shots with deadly grace when he could not, each one a perfect hit. The runners exploded. Ordinarily boltguns inspired terror, but the crowd had lost all reason.

More controlled bolt fire sounded from a dozen locations around the avenue.

'Conserve your ammunition,' Corax ordered. 'Withdraw. They no longer have minds that can be tricked by the shadow gift. You must fall back now.'

A hollow groan came from Corax's left. A group of afflicted had come down onto the catwalk from the access point behind him. As soon as they saw him they broke into a shambling gallop. Their eyes were dead of thought, replaced by a desire to rend flesh.

They had no fear of him. As they reached him, Corax cut them down with his lightning claws. The sounds of the disruption fields drew more onto the catwalk from the nearer access way.

Cursing, Corax abandoned stealth entirely. He brought his armour systems to full power and opened his strategic vox-link. Immediately, reports streamed in from all over the city.

The entire population was affected; two hundred thousand Carinaeans now stood against the Legion, along with eight thousand Imperial Army soldiers turned from allies to enemies. Everyone on board who was not wearing breathing equipment had fallen, and in the worst-affected areas, all of those who were as well. In one stroke, Agarth had turned the entire city against the Raven Guard. A series of careful surgical strikes had become a battle against a massed enemy. Along the front, hordes of violent citizens were attacking his men. Behind the line of conquest, where regiments of standard humans were intermingled with Space Marines, anarchy reigned as mindless soldiers turned on the Legion. All reports were delivered to a background of thumping boltgun fire.

More afflicted poured onto the catwalk from the service access. In seconds they were all over him, snarling and clawing. Their fingernails ripped free of their beds in the fury, their fingers broke on his ceramite. They scrabbled at him so hard the flesh was stripped from their fingertips, leaving smears of blood all over the black of his armour. They could not get through, but they could drag him down.

Corax lashed out. His claws slashed many of the afflicted to ruin, but more took their place and pressed at him. They piled on him, drooling mouths working out painful moans, eyes rolling. Teeth shattered on the edges of his armour plates.

He could slaughter them forever and it would do no good. He turned quickly, hurling them from his back, and forced his way to the edge of the walkway.

The cables holding up the catwalk prevented his escape. Corax shrugged a biting man off his shoulder and swept his claws through. Plasteel parted with melodic twangs. The walkway swayed, but did not fall. Corax plucked a ravening man from his back, using him as a bludgeon to swat away the afflicted. Setting his shoulders forward, he held both claws out sideways and launched himself at the side of the walkway again, cleaving dozens of hawsers in two. Red-hot ends whipped around, cutting limbs loose. The afflicted fought on until they bled out.

Half-supported, the catwalk sagged under the combined weight of Corax and his attackers. Still he could not get free. He was a caged bird, trapped by a press of howling men and women. Limbs flailed at him weakly as their owners were crushed to death beneath Corax's bulk and the push of those coming from behind. There were hundreds on the walk now, drawn by the sounds of conflict. In a few seconds he would be buried beneath a tide of mindless flesh.

Corax slashed downwards with his claws. Metal and sparks tumbled into the open air as he sectioned the grill of the catwalk. Steam burst from ruptured pipes. The afflicted leapt onto him as quickly as he could toss them away. Hands attempted to wrench his helmet from his head. He flung out his arms, spun around to clear a space and, with a thought, spread the Korvidine Pinions, his marvellous mechanical wings. Plasteel feathers burst from the housings on his back to mince half a dozen of the afflicted. More took their place. His wings and claws switched about, their razored metal decapitating and maiming. Still they hurled themselves at him.

Shouting his anger, Corax dragged his arms free of clumsy grasps and cut at the floor one last time.

The catwalk lurched and fell, cables pinging as it peeled away from the roof. Conduits snapped with showers of sparks. Human bodies tumbled, teeth still snapping as they plummeted, until the moment of their impact and their second death.

Corax hurled an afflicted from his face. His wings slashed, obliterating human bodies clinging to him. Finding some balance, he ignited the flightpack jets, incinerating those who raked at his legs. Corax went into a spiral, his flight upset by the human beasts still hanging on to him. He smote

at them, and crushed them, until he was free and flying high. He swooped over the crowd of afflicted, who bayed and chased him though they could not catch him. Quickly, he assessed the situation. His warriors, those rare shadow lords, were surrounded. Not one was easy prey, but they were attacked, and many were dragged down, their armour torn free and their bodies clawed to pieces.

One by one, the bark of boltguns fell silent.

Corax saw a number escape, clambering high and fast up roof supports. The strength of their armour helped them. Once out of the crowds they were faster than the mind-wiped and outpaced them. But the afflicted were everywhere, and warriors who fought out of one group of shrieking people ran straight into another.

Corax could carry his sons to safety one at a time, but which first? His eyes darted from warrior to warrior, calculating the order that would allow him to save the most. Screaming in frustration that he could not help them all, Corax dived hard towards Enkern.

He pulled up hard before he impacted the ground, his jets blasting a dozen of the afflicted to ash. The sweep of his blades cut down a swathe more. Bodies burst under his boots as he landed. Claws out, he cut his way through to his son.

‘With me, Enkern!’ he bellowed.

Enkern was out of bolt-rounds and his gun was jammed with gore from its use as a bludgeon. He slapped it to his thigh and lunged for Corax’s outstretched hand.

Ceramite gripped ceramite. Corax blasted upwards. He scanned the area, seeking a place of safety. He found one on the highest terrace of a leisure palace. The Mor Deythan Ledennen had already reached the place.

Corax deposited Enkern alongside his squad brother. Ledennen had locked the doors leading off the balcony into an entertainment area within. The delights of the building were overturned. Shattered furnishings and fine glassware were scattered among bodies felled by Ledennen. On the far side of the windows crowds of degenerates gathered. They pressed those at the front so hard they were pinned against the glass. These were truly dead, the air crushed out of them, but they remained upright.

‘There is strength in numbers,’ Corax said. ‘Fight together. I will bring the others here.’

He was away again, swooping like a hawk into the howling mass. Another of his sons he rescued, then a third. The fourth he could not save, but watched in anger as he was dragged under a writhing forest of limbs.

Corax blasted upwards, screaming as loudly as his jets. On his faceplate the

signum runes of his sons blinked out. Of the twelve Mor Deythan who had accompanied him into the city's heart, nine remained. Five had made their way from the parklands on their own, three together, the other two alone. The four on the terrace were trapped. He returned to aid them.

The primarch's landing cracked the paving.

The four Mor Deythan stood ready, their bolters aimed at the glass. Enkern had field-stripped and cleaned his weapon. Between them they had maybe three hundred rounds.

'That glass will not hold,' said Ledennen.

Corax stared at the mindless herd massing indoors.

'My lord,' Enkern said. 'As far as I can ascertain all exits are blocked by afflicted pursuing our brothers. I suggest you depart. We will hold here and wait to be relieved.'

The glass creaked. Thousands of the afflicted were pouring into the building, pressing into those already there. At the front of the crowd, one of them split open along his belly. He was only the first.

'No,' said Corax. 'You will die. I will not allow you to waste yourselves like this. There is a way out.' He looked upwards to the arcade roof. 'Into the void.' He flung himself skyward, claws outstretched, and crashed into one of the transparent domes.

Diamond-hard glass met monomolecular claws sheathed in lighting. Spears of energy discharge skittered over the glass, earthing themselves in the plasteel muntins separating the giant, triangular panes from each other.

Corax drew back. The pane was pitted. He dropped towards the ground, arresting his plummet with a rush of exhaust and spread wings. He twisted, and boosted his jets into rapid ascent. He slammed into the dome, his claws unerringly finding the weakness in the glass.

Corax punched through in a spray of shards, which escaped Zenith-312's weak gravity and wheeled off into the void.

A gushing, white curl of escaping atmosphere followed him.

Over the roar of escaping atmosphere, it was hard to hear his sons' vox messages.

'My lord! The afflicted have broken through the glass.'

Bolt fire followed.

Corax fought his way down through the hurricane. Violent currents tossed him about as he flew back to the terrace. A single sheet in the run of windows on the terrace had fallen to pieces. The afflicted forced their way through, shredding themselves on the jagged edges. Enkern, Ledennen and the rest pumped their remaining bolts into the advancing horde with admirable parsimony, each shot delivered only when necessary. Torsos burst. Heads

exploded. The afflicted slipped in the spilled guts of their fellows, but the Space Marines might as well have cast pebbles to stop an avalanche.

Corax grabbed the first of his sons by his backpack and bore him to the breach leading to the void. He threw him bodily into the rush of air, and dived back down. The second he took moments later. By then the afflicted were fanning out, coming at Corax's warriors from all sides. With the volume of fire coming at them reduced, the horde pressed the Mor Deythan hard. Corax took Enkern as the third, just as the afflicted's grasping hands were reaching for black armour. Ledennen was left alone.

'Stay alive, my son,' Corax shouted.

Ledennen responded with a spray of fully automatic fire.

With Enkern thrown through the storm and into the safety of the void, Corax plunged again. Ledennen was lost under a seethe of once-men.

'Father…' Ledennen's vox crackled in Corax's ear.

The primarch swept over the pile, breaking it apart with wing and claw as he flew past, and wheeled back around. There was nowhere to land. The terrace was packed. Ledennen pushed out from the slop of dismembered bodies, and cast himself from the balcony edge before the afflicted could catch him again.

Corax dived after his falling son, wings shrieking through the vanishing air. He lurched as he caught Ledennen. The legionary's weight dragged them both groundwards. From the parkland, a forest of hands reached for them.

Firing his flightpack jets on full burn, Corax brought their plummet under control. The primarch hauled his son away mere centimetres before his feet were snatched by the afflicted.

He accelerated away from the howling mob.

Corax rode the decompression gale through the hole and into the void. Hundreds of vox messages bombarded him from all quarters. The attack had been thrown into disarray.

No more did the void dance with war. Weapons fire had ceased from virtually all quadrants of Zenith-312. Like the Imperium, the Carinaeans utilised servitor technology. In every cyborg dwelled a human brain, and though most were sorry, pruned things, they were as susceptible to the anima-phage's aggressive rewiring as a normal being's. The battle was now confined within the city halls. Corax's plans to take Zenith-312 quickly and intact were in ruins.

The rescued Shadowmasters were caught in the city's weak gravity well and drifting back, controlling their approach with bursts of their stabilisation jets.

Corax's wings furled. His jets powered down. Automated emergency systems in the grand arcade were closing off the exits to contain the breach and save the rest of the city. The flow of air slackened. Soon the mindless

citizens would begin to die for want of oxygen.

The primarch brought himself to a floating halt and set his armour vox to broadcast on all channels.

‘Hear me, Agarth of Zenith-Three-One-Two,’ he said. Such rage infused his words that all who heard it trembled. ‘This atrocity you have perpetrated upon your people will not go unpunished. You cannot hide. You cannot run. I shall find you and make you suffer for your deeds today.’

Static hiss greeted Corax’s pronouncement. Agarth had no response.

He turned to face his ships.

‘Bring yourselves to the surface,’ he told the Mor Deythan. ‘Maintain constant broadcast of your signum beacons. You will be retrieved. I must return without you.’

He reset his jets to vacuum burn. Angling himself towards the fleet, he flew as fast as he could to the *Saviour in Shadow*.

FOURTEEN

DEAD RISING

Caius Valerius was busy attempting to contact his regimental officers, so at first did not notice the fighting had stopped. He was absorbed by the hissing quiet of open vox-channels that carried no words. The chatter of his regiment shifted quickly from the organised relays of report and command to panic, screams, then nothing. At Caius' command, the vox-master tuned the company nuncio set up and down the frequencies.

'What has happened? Any word?' asked Valerius.

The vox-master, his face set with concentration, shook his head. They tried their own ships first. They too could not make contact with the cohort.

Caius listened as the vox-master tried each company command, then each section command, of the Therion cohort on Zenith-Three-One-Two. The vox-master repeated the same words to every section before moving on to the next, 'Section eight-nine-two, this is Therion command, give status,' he would say, before the brittle click of the nuncio set moved him to the next section, then the next.

Click. 'Section eight-nine-three, this is Therion command, give status.' A million serpents hissed.

Click. 'Section eight-nine-four, this is Therion command, give status.' Static, soporific yet sinister.

'The viral agent. It's killed them all,' said the surgeon general. 'I have never seen anything like it.'

Click. 'Section eight-nine-five, this is Therion command, give status.'

‘Be quiet, Cordellus,’ said Caius, more harshly than he intended. He was intent on the vox, hoping that others had survived.

The vox-master moved the dial on. Click. ‘Section eight-nine-six, this is Therion command, give status.’ The vox-master’s face became grimmer with each repetition.

‘My advice to you, praefector, is that we immediately withdraw,’ said the surgeon general. ‘If the agent gets in here…’

‘Not until we are ordered to by the primarch,’ said Caius.

‘Did he sanction the release? Could this be our weapon?’ asked the surgeon general.

Caius shook his head. ‘Phospex, rad and viral weapons have little favour with Lord Corax. They are too indiscriminate.’

A final click, the final section. ‘Section nine hundred, this is Therion command, give status.’ The vox-master pulled his vox-phones from his ears and looked up wearily. ‘That’s it, sir. All of them. No response.’

Caius nodded. The vox-master flicked the nuncio to receive. Silent channels shushed them.

‘They’re all dead then,’ said Cordellus.

It was then the command unit noticed an ominous stillness, all together, as if they had been entranced by the vox-master’s calls and had to listen to a set number of repetitions before being released.

‘Sir…’ said his ensign.

Caius looked at his feet. The deck no longer shook to the beat of war’s drum.

‘The guns. They’ve stopped,’ said Milontius.

‘There’s nothing coming in from the outside either. The fleet has ceased firing on the city.’

‘Get me Legion command. Now,’ said Caius.

‘Who?’ asked the vox-master.

‘Anyone!’ snapped Caius.

Anyone was easily found. The sleety whisper of dead channels was replaced abruptly with the crackle and bang of bolt weaponry. The sudden change made all the men in the observation deck jump.

‘This is Caius Valerius of the Therion Cohort. Who am I speaking with?’

‘Captain Effe Dellius.’ The response was terse. The captain had other things than conversation on his mind. *‘I am surprised you are alive.’*

‘The ventilation systems are inactive in our section.’

The captain grunted. Incoherent howling, muffled by a ceramite helm, broke apart under the hammer of bolt noise.

‘I thought the fighting had stopped,’ said Caius. ‘I require a status update.’

‘The city is a loss,’ said Captain Dellius. He was panting with effort. The

sound of combat moved away from him a little. The noise of moving power armour stopped as he came to rest. ‘*The tyrant Agarth released an anima-phage into the air systems. Everyone’s as good as dead, reduced to animals. The whole city’s turned against us. The Legion is scattered. We’re surrounded on all sides.’* A chilling scream cut across his voice, forcing him to shout.

‘The Imperial Army?’

‘*You’re the last of it,’* said the captain. ‘*My Apothecary says the phage will burn itself out if it hasn’t already, but those affected by it are everywhere. Stay where you are. You will not be able to hold them back. There are too many.’* Another roaring, bubbling scream. A gunshot. *‘Good fortune, praefector.’*

Captain Effe Dellius severed the link.

Several more connections were made. All told the same story, Raven Guard legionaries trapped by mobs of ravening citizens. Instead of an army of a few thousand disciplined soldiers, they were fighting a city of mindless creatures who knew no fear of death. The Legion was in uproar. The primarch was missing. There was no guidance for the Therions.

‘Terra’s light,’ whispered Caius. ‘Anima-phage. I thought it was a myth. What kind of man uses such a thing?’

‘The one we are fighting,’ said Surgeon General Cordellus.

Caius looked out of the broken windows to the hangar bay. Five of his drop-ships waited there, leaking coolant vapours from their engine vents. Four more landing pads were occupied with debris piled up by his men.

‘Shut down all access to this section,’ said Caius. ‘Post the boarding parties to major ingress points. Redouble effort to clear off those landing pads. Call in more gunships.’

‘You’ll be exposing more of our people to the phage if we go back to the fleet,’ said the surgeon general.

‘But we’re not infected, are we? And the captain said the virus had burned itself out,’ said Caius. He glanced at a ventilation duct. ‘I’ll not abandon the civilians. Prepare the drop-ships for launch. Begin plans for evacuation!’ He was still issuing orders as he marched out of the room.

Caius had ordered the door to the warehouse gallery stairs left open. It was a small mercy to the people held within, but probably had next to no effect lowering the temperature. The heat of a thousand confined bodies generated a steady wind that buffeted Caius as he approached the doorway. A pair of elite Therion boarding troops in heavy carapace stood sentry. Caius was already sweating as he passed between them. The heat grew as he descended. The air blowing up was moist, scented with breath and sweat. He couldn’t shake the feeling he was creeping down a great beast’s throat.

Another of his boarders stood watch from the companionway, a bulky atmospheric sensor unit hung by its recharging cord from his belt. His armour was void-proof and therefore outfitted with layered insulation. It was always hot in those armour sets, Caius remembered well from his days as a line officer, even though they had inbuilt cooling systems. Today, he was one of the lucky few. Hot as the suits were, its meagre cooling systems meant it was far hotter without one.

Sweat burst out in a wet line across Caius' forehead, and then like rain, one, two drops, it was flowing out of him everywhere, all at once. His shirt stuck to his back. His skin flushed. He was better off than the detainees sweltering in the warehouse below.

Piles of discarded outer clothing lay in drifts around the civilians. They were listless, sipping water from canteens distributed by the Therions. Children squalled or drowsed. None played. The air was turning sour with the smell of human waste. The warehouse was equipped with two ablutorials for the warehouse workers, beyond inadequate for a thousand people.

The Therions standing guard in the pit were worst off. They worked slowly, made lethargic by the tropical climate, as they carried buckets of water around the hall. They were in high demand, and as soon as they had emptied their buckets into canteens and waiting cups, they slouched off to fetch more. Their uniforms were soaking with sweat. Those manning the screening desks were irritable.

There was a voxmitter hanging on a hook from the rail. Caius picked it up, and took a breath. The air was warmer than his lungs. It was an odd feeling. Like drowning.

He rehearsed the words he would say before he spoke. His grasp of the local language was good but not perfect. He did not wish to look a fool.

'People of Carinae!' Caius' voice emerged, metallic from the hailer's horn. Echoes from plasteel walls and shipping containers turned it more inhuman still. The plastek of the mouthpiece was obscenely warm against his lips. 'The war to liberate you from the oppression of the tyrants of this system continues. Unfortunately, our plan to allow you to return to your homes has to be revised.'

The people stirred. Murmurs rose.

'We're suffocating! You can't mean to leave us in here?' one shouted.

Caius continued without acknowledging the interruption. 'Shortly, we will begin removing you from this warehouse to the safety of our voidships, where you will be cared for until the situation here is resolved.'

The atmosphere changed immediately. A tension formed over the crowd. Caius moved the horn away from his mouth. His finger relaxed on the

voxmitter’s trigger. Crowds were dangerous if handled poorly. He must choose his next words carefully. He had no idea what to say.

A man in long, orange robes got to his feet. His two wives and a gaggle of children were bunched around his feet. He wore a single strand of beads running from a piercing in his ear to one in his nose, marking him out as a low-ranking official.

‘What situation?’ the official demanded. ‘What has happened?’

Caius weighed telling the truth. Frantically whispered conversations broke up the warehouse hush. There were so many that they threatened to drown him out, even though no one raised their voice. The noise was maddening, conspiring with the addling heat to make his head spin.

He brought the voxmitter to his mouth again. Honesty would have to serve.

‘Your leader released a viral agent into the city. All areas except this one are contaminated. If you are to live, I must remove you. I promise that you will return home as soon as is possible.’

He realised his mistake as soon as he spoke.

Cries of alarm went up from the crowd.

‘What? Does he mean they are all dead?’ he heard someone say. The rest was a cacophony. He tried to catch what they were saying, but their language was too fast and too new to him.

‘It’s a lie!’ shouted the official. He had to try several times to make himself heard. ‘It’s a lie!’ The people quietened a moment. ‘Don’t you understand?’ said the official. ‘Arch-Comptroller Agarth has no such weapons, and if he did, why would he use them on his own people?’ The noise swelled again. People were shouting this time. The official held up his hands and lowered them, pushing down the noise. ‘It is a lie to make us compliant.’ He flung up an accusing gesture at Caius. ‘They’ve taken the city. They’re going to enslave us!’

Already close to panic, the crowd began to rise.

‘They’re going to kill us!’ someone else shouted.

The Therions at the desks pushed their chairs away and took backward steps away from the crowd, their hands straying to their pistols. The few sentries down in the warehouse moved to join them, bringing their guns up to readiness but not yet aiming them straight at the crowd. The Carinaeans being questioned were stranded uncomfortably between their captors and their own people.

‘What if he’s right? What if he’s telling the truth?’ A lone voice of reason, quickly lost.

Caius could see where it was all going. He sped down a sickening slide of inevitability.

‘Stand down!’ he shouted through the voxmitter so hard his words growled with distortion. ‘I am not lying. The city is contaminated.’

‘Let’s go. They can’t stop us,’ the official cried. ‘Bring them down! They are few, we are many! Open the main cargo doors – they lead into the handling area. That’s the quickest way back to the residential sectors. They can’t stop us!’

‘Stop!’ shouted Caius. But the official was right: he couldn’t stop them.

The crowd lunged forward as one. Seven rapid cracks of las-fire snapped into the crowd. Those hit fell and vanished under milling robed bodies. The line of men and women hit the Therions.

The Carinaeans towered over the Therions, and though they were muscularly feeble, they were used to moving under the city’s weak artificial gravity. They outnumbered the guards hundreds to one. The Therions were swallowed up without a trace.

‘Do not open the doors!’ shouted Caius. The companionway juddered. Men with determined looks on their faces were running up the steps leading from the warehouse floor. The balcony sentry ceased shooting into the crowd and turned his gun on the men rushing upwards.

‘Do not open the doors!’ Caius repeated.

The boarding trooper’s gun cracked sharply. One of the men tumbled backwards, head over heels into those behind him. Children were screaming; women huddled over their offspring to protect them as the crowd pushed forward in a single, roaring mass.

A yellow light spun around above the giant cargo doors.

Someone had got to the door controls.

A wheezing klaxon sounded. The building, short-lived whine of machinery engaging trembled the walls. Locks disengaged, and the doors drew back, interlocking teeth parting like a sideways mouth.

A gust of fresh air blew in from the octagonal handling area next door. Turntables, cranes and other idle machines stood motionless on the far side, radiating a pleasant, metallic cool. Other doors leading to other warehouses stood closed in each wall.

The relief of temperature change was so great that the crowd faltered. They closed their eyes and let the sweat dry to salt on their faces.

Eyes opened.

‘See? See?’ shouted the official. ‘They are lying! There is no plague!’

‘Sir, you must leave,’ said the boarding trooper. He grabbed Caius’ shoulder and pushed him back behind him. ‘I will hold them back.’ He set his shoulders, gun couched and ready, to await the attackers advancing up the switchback flight of stairs.

Caius watched numbly. He was paralysed. Cold air blew up at him. He should have called the guards at the top of the stairs leading into the hangar. He should have done something, but all he could do was watch. The scene had the distant quality of an old memory, like he was reliving some trauma he had experienced long ago.

The crowd moved into the handling area, slowly at first, but when no one stopped them they began to run. Impetuous young men first, then everyone. They swarmed around the machines, heading for a pedestrian corridor whose small mouth opened at the side of one of the handling area's great gates.

People disappeared within.

The first scream came a few seconds later.

The crowd slowed. People at the back craned their necks. Those nearer the front backed away. A man emerged from the corridor, slamming into the line of people behind him. His screams passed from throat to throat, until they flooded from one room to another, and everyone was shouting, pushing to get back into the warehouse they had been so keen to escape. The crowd compressed into a wave against the back wall, the people merging into a brightly coloured solid. There was nowhere for them to go. People screamed with their last, squeezed breaths.

From the corridor in the handling area the afflicted came. They ran strangely, a drunkard's reeling. Hands flailed at the clothes and arms of the running Carinaeans, latching on firmly. When a person was caught, they were yanked back and down, disappearing under a flurry of clawing fingers and snapping teeth. A Therion rose, bloody from his earlier beating, and shoved his way through the churning crowd, only to come face to face with an afflicted and be pulled down a final time.

'Sir!' the Therion sentry called urgently over his shoulder. 'Get out of here!'

The men rounded the last angle of the stairs. Escape was their only goal. Caius knocked the sentry's gun aside as he fired, sending the las-beam wide.

Stirred into action, Caius shouted to his would-be killers. 'Up the stairs, into the hangar!' He activated his vox-bead. 'Let them through – when they come, let them through!' He had no time to wait to see if his order was heeded. Once again, he spoke through the voxmitter. Screams vied with his commands. Those of the afflicted were terrible, yowling grunts. The noises of animals sick with madness.

A man came to a stop in front of him, willowy fingers clenched for violence, his face scrunched with uncertainty.

Caius took command.

'Up the stairs!' he shouted up into the man's face. 'Get up the stairs! It's the only way out!'

The man backed off, puzzled, then turned and ran after his fellows. No more challenged Caius.

‘You!’ he said to the sentry. ‘Pick off the afflicted. Clear a route for the civilians.’

The trooper nodded. People wary of the stairway leading up to the lone, small door at the top of the chamber and its armed guard now scrambled for it desperately. The crowd pulled slightly at the side as more and more of them took the stairs, unravelling into a skein of individuals. They threaded themselves up the steps. The afflicted followed.

The sentry was firing as quickly as he could, charge lights on his lasgun blinking down to zero. Caius ran back up into the hangar. The sentries at the top had the fleeing men on their knees with their hands on heads.

‘Section three-three-two, section three-four-five, cover this door!’ shouted Caius. Men left their tasks, snatched up guns, and formed angled lines around the door. ‘Get them off their knees and out of here!’ he shouted, pointing at the Carinaeans. ‘Open all drop-ship ramps. Begin evacuation procedures immediately. Save as many as you can. They are coming!’

The hangar burst into activity. Milontius dutifully trotted up to his master. He handed one of his two las-rifles to Caius.

‘Praefector?’ asked Milontius.

‘The damned are coming,’ Caius said. He flipped the rifle onto its side. The charge indicator was a solid green. He marched to the end of the lines of men covering the door. ‘Do not shoot the civilians. I repeat, let them be. The victims of the anima-phage are in pursuit. Kill them all.’

‘How do we tell the difference, sir?’ asked Milontius.

‘You’ll see,’ said Caius. He spoke into his vox-bead. ‘Sentry, return to the hangar.’ He waved to a group of boarding troops with black stripes down the front of their enclosed helmets. ‘Shield bearers, take up station, five either side. Prepare to hold and close the door on my command!’

The men picked up breaching shields neatly stacked at the side of the hangar and waited tensely by the door.

More Carinaeans ran out of the stairwell head. They faltered at the line of guns.

‘Move!’ screamed Caius. ‘Into the ships!’ Other men joined in his exhortation in a mixture of Gothic and mangled Carinaean.

People were piling out of the stairhead, shunting the first arrivals into motion. Caius pressed his lasrifle into his shoulder and counted the fleeing men, women and children as they passed. Fifty, a hundred. A flash of white armour appeared in the rush of multicoloured robes. With relief, he saw the sentry had made it out. Command’s greatest burden was ordering men to lay

down their lives.

Another ten, another twenty. Caius urged them on with his mind as he waited, finger on trigger. Beckoning officers directed the running Carinaeans out past the firing line to others who guided them onto the nearest drop-ship. It was close to full. Turbines whined, building speed, then the noise of their spinning was lost to the whumph of ignited plasma jets. His men were filing aboard their transports. The first lifted off, hot backwash scorching Caius' neck. It slid out through the atmospheric shielding and turned into a steep climb relative to Zenith-312. Seamlessly, a replacement came into the hangar, turned on the spot, and landed, its ramp already extending from the rear. The engine nacelles vibrated with continued output, running hot for a quick getaway.

Another ship took off, not quite loud enough to mask the desperate cries sounding up the stairs. A few more of the willowy natives of Zenith-312 lunged into the hangar, their faces white with terror at the death snapping at their heels.

A tide of afflicted Carinaeans burst through the door after them.

'Fire!' roared Caius. His words were lost in the scream of drop-ships, but his men were already shooting.

The narrow triangle of space delineated by the Therions and the hangar's wall lit up with ruby beams. They were short-lived, almost gone before they registered on the eye, but so numerous they made a flickering interlay on the air, as if a divine artisan were in the process of weaving threads of light.

The afflicted tumbled down, smoking holes punched through their bodies.

'Section three-four-five, withdraw,' Caius shouted, so loudly his throat hurt. 'Shield teams, force brace, push them back, and force the door closed! Section three-three-two, cover and assist.'

Were it not for the terror of the situation, Caius would have paused for a prideful moment to watch his men act with perfect discipline. Section 345 peeled off, still firing. Half of section 332 advanced in a double line. The shots of all focused on the doorway. The other half of the section dragged bodies out of the way to clear a path for the breacher teams, who locked their shields together as they neared the door, boxing in the afflicted, pushing them back towards the wall and doorway. When the edges of all the shields were touching, all thirty men of section 332 ran at the shield bearers, forming a scrum to support the boarding teams against the weight of the afflicted pushing at them.

'Close the door!' ordered Caius.

A light spun around over the doorway. A klaxon began a grunting call. The door was heavy, void-proofed should the hangar integrity fields fail, and

powered by a mighty cog running in a toothed track.

The door rumbled halfway closed, and ground to a halt. Limbs jammed the workings. A soldier reached through to yank the obstruction free and screamed, snatching back an arm ribboned with fingernail marks. The afflicted jumped and scrabbled at the tops of the breaching shields, trying to scramble over. Those that came close to succeeding were executed by the squad sergeants. One drilled a Carinaean through the head, spraying half-cooked brain matter over the howling mob behind.

'It's not going to close!' yelled the sergeant.

Caius got to the back of the knot of men pressing against the horde. He craned his neck, trying to see over their heads to the door. The drop-ships were leaving. The hangar was emptying of people.

'We'll have to dash for it,' he said. He summoned a pair of squads from section 345 already aboard their transport. 'Line the gangway. Prepare for our retreat. We'll cut them down as we pull back. Section three-three-two first, heavy boarding squads after. Boarding squads, present sidearms!' he ordered.

'Present sidearms!' echoed their sergeants.

Laspistols, inferno pistols and a pair of lascutters were locked into place in the shields' firing loops. He wondered if there was enough firepower there to incinerate the dead. The blast would be ferocious, probably turn the corridor into a furnace, but it would likely fuse the cog to the tooth track. If it shut, all well and good. He doubted it would.

'Section three-three-two, prepare to fall back!'

Again, the commands were relayed by the powerful voices of the Therion sergeants.

'Boarders, fire!'

The boarders opened up with their weaponry. Lasguns did a neat job of killing. The rest did not. Lascutters were not intended for combat, being short-ranged tools for slicing into ship hulls and bulkheads that required careful setting up, but when the right occasion arose they could be deadly close-range guns. Fans of las-fire flicked out, cutting the foremost members of the mob down. Fusion pistols flash-cooked men who exploded into roars of superheated gas. Gobbets of steaming meat rained down. A spot landed on Caius' face, burning him.

The door was choked with the dead. Body fat burned, liquefied and ignited from exposure to the periphery of melta-beams. Black smoke bellied out into the hangar.

'Section three-three-two, fall back!' Caius yelled.

The men broke from their bracing positions and ran as fast as they could for the waiting ship.

The breaching squad took the full brunt of the resurgent horde. A second round of fire bought them a moment of grace, and set corpses jamming the stairwell fully ablaze.

‘Run!’ screamed Caius.

The squad abandoned their heavy shields and turned tail, revealing a vision of hell in the corridor.

Scores of afflicted Carinaeans shoved their way out of the stairwell. They were on fire, their eyes cooking in their sockets, their fat running as liquid flame from their limbs, their skin sliding off them in rags. They didn’t feel it, but kept on coming until their bodies gave up, burned through, and they rolled about in heat-tightened balls upon the deck before they expired.

Even after five decades of warfare, it was one of the most awful things Caius had ever seen.

‘Sir!’ Milontius grabbed him. ‘My lord praefector! The ship!’

Stabs of coherent light scythed into the burning phage victims, knocking them mercifully dead. Milontius grabbed at his master, hustling him through the thickening smoke. Alarms blared everywhere. A female Carinaean voice announced an imminent atmospheric purge to quell the flames. It was a recording. Caius imagined the woman was one of those spilling out of the stairwell, mindless, aflame from head to foot.

The ring of metal underfoot changed from the dull bass thud of solid decking to the higher pitch of the gangway to the drop-ship. Hands yanked at Caius, bundling him into a troop hold lit emergency lumen-red.

Dozens of faces, Therion and Carinaean, stared in horror at the carnage outside.

The ramp closed before the voice finished its countdown. The atmospheric shields winked out. The pouring of the hangar atmosphere into space was a slight jolt to the rising ship’s progress.

‘Let me through!’ said Caius, and fought his way through the crammed hold towards the ship’s upper levels, and the cockpit there.

The way was crammed with refugees. Caius gave up trying to step gently past them and stepped on them. They were paralysed with fear. Several were close to catatonia. Soft weeping filtered up the stairs from the hold.

‘Move, damn you, move!’ shouted Caius. Finally, he made the drop-ship’s small cockpit.

Through the inches-thick armourglass of the canopy, the void spread in every direction. Raven Guard ships lurked ahead, black on black, their grey Therion counterparts conspicuous beside them. The guns of the fleet were inactive, but away to the upper right the spark and flare of void shields gave away the position of the Twenty-Seventh Expeditionary Fleet. The cities of the

Carinaean Sodality were repositioning, covered by a torrent of fire.

'What a disaster,' breathed Caius softly.

The vox squawked. A badly distorted voice filled the cockpit.

'Therion drop-ship, this is combined fleet command. Cut engines. Reverse burn. Come to a dead stop and await further orders.'

The pilots glanced at each other.

'We are on a trajectory to land aboard our own ships,' one said. 'Please advise.'

'You are to come to a dead stop now. If you proceed beyond fleet perimeter, you will be destroyed.'

'We have wounded and civilians on board. We are over capacity. We need to land,' the pilot said.

'Halt now,' the voice said.

'They're powering their weapons.'

'They fear contamination,' said Caius. 'Give me a vox-pickup. And cut the engines.'

'Sir?'

'Do as they say, now,' said Caius. One of the pilots handed him a delicate vox headset. Caius held it to his mouth and ear.

'Combined fleet command, this is Caius Valerius, praefector of the Therion Cohort. We will do as advised.' His eyes strayed to the instrument panels. Blinking lights warned of weapons lock. He imagined guns recoiling from their dreadful duty, ejecting scouring balls of plasma towards the fleeing Therion ships.

He would almost welcome it, he thought.

'The phage has worked itself out. My men and I are unaffected despite exposure. Although I understand there can be no chance this phage gets aboard our ships, we cannot wait indefinitely. These ships cannot support this number of people for longer than…' He looked quizzically at the pilots.

'Three hours, sir.'

'Three hours,' said Caius. 'When shall we be assessed?'

There was a short pause. The red lumens flickered on the panel.

They are going to shoot us, thought Caius. This is it. All this war and service to be shot down by my own side as a precautionary measure.

'Stand down,' the voice said abruptly. *'Wait for further instruction.'*

They were kept waiting for two hours before further messages reached them. They only came because the primarch returned.

FIFTEEN

THE RAVEN'S CHOICE

'Here, my Lord Corax.'

The strategium operative slowed the pict-feed to a crawl. A bright light flashed on the underside of Zenith-312. Ejection spall glittered a shining cone into space, cloaking the departure of a swift needle of metal.

Corax leaned in. The smell of drying blood had the crewman lean away from the primarch. His armour was covered in it. Corax had returned to his ships, issued orders for the recovery of his most vulnerable servants, then set out again immediately at the head of his Terminators, leading swift rescue missions to snatch his men back from the claws of disaster. The companies which had deployed en masse to take the docking ring and the sunward hangars and gun decks of the city emerged more or less unscathed. They formed firing lines in the wider halls and avenues, shutting off major access ways with tanks and Dreadnoughts ordered to kill anything that moved on sight. Their weight of fire combined mowed down the afflicted Carinaeans by the thousand, while flamers set crowds of hundreds ablaze. They contained the hordes and cut them apart. Those areas were secure and still in Raven Guard hands, though even the legionaries were left perturbed by the unremitting nature of the slaughter.

It was the small, advance units sent to disable or capture key targets that found themselves in trouble. Groups ranging from lone operatives to reconnaissance demi-companies of fifty men. All of them were stranded, surrounded by thousands upon thousands of citizens rendered into raging

beasts by the phage. Caught up in the city's warrens of ducts and corridors, the advantage of boltgun and power armour was greatly reduced. They rapidly ran out of ammunition. They broke their weapons through overuse. Dozens were dragged down. Hundreds remained unaccounted for. A concerted push from the safer sectors was ridding Zenith-312 of its mindless inhabitants. Planned venting purged some of the central sections but it would take time to secure the city, and the Apothecaries had yet to determine if the virus was truly inactive.

'That is Agarth's ship,' said Corax. The sight of the small, half-visible dart rushing for freedom turned his heart to ice. He had thought that perhaps the arch-comptroller had sacrificed himself along with his population in a misguided act of defiance. Murder-suicide would have been bad enough, but it appeared that he had condemned his people to death to cover his own escape.

'Freeze the image,' the primarch said.

The crew were nervous. They expected him to demand to know why they had missed this escape vessel, why it had not been noticed, targeted and destroyed. But Agarth had been clever. The ship launched at the height of the confusion caused by the phage. It was small, quick, unreflective, and shaped for minimum registration on augur systems.

'He has planned this for a long time,' Corax said. He pointed at the ship. 'This is why my father wishes to unify mankind, to prevent this sort of atrocity from ever happening again. War is one thing, but this, this is cowardice.'

'He is scum of the worst kind,' said Branne quietly. His brother was beside him, equally incensed. Most of those on the wide command deck were born of Deliverance. Agarth's actions were as callous as those of their Kiavahran tormentors.

Corvus Corax faced the crew upon the command deck of the *Saviour in Shadow*. 'Arch-Comptroller Agarth is to be hunted down. Fleet to adopt wide search patterns. Find him. Bring him to me.'

There were mutters of agreement. But not all were convinced of this course of action.

'What about the rest of the system?' asked Agapito.

'The Twenty-Seventh Expeditionary Fleet will make an immediate assault upon the Thousand Moons, as per Fenc's plan.'

Agapito hesitated before speaking.

'What is it, brother?' asked Branne.

'If we are not there to support them, they will struggle. With us at their side, we can end this quickly before the cities reach optimal firing situation.

Without us–’

Corax’s pale white face leaned towards his old comrade in arms, interrupting him. ‘Agapito, Agarth has denied us the opportunity to show convincing force. He has escaped. If we allow Agarth to go free, we will undermine the Carinae Sodality’s understanding of Imperial justice. The elite will see themselves free of consequence, the populace will despair that we cannot save them. We cast ourselves as saviours from tyranny and the bringers of civilisation to all men. We lie if Agarth does not face justice. Those who commit outrage cannot be allowed to escape. We will hunt him down and destroy him.’

Ephrenia stood from her station at the deck strategium.

‘Forgive me, my lord. We should think about what Agapito says. Perhaps we should discuss this in private?’ she said.

Corax’s eyes narrowed. Those around him reacted uneasily. It was not normal for a mortal to address a primarch so bluntly.

‘Whatever you have to say to me, Ephrenia, can be said in front of all. Unless you dare not.’

She smiled at him sadly. Ephrenia had been with Corax since the moment he had been freed from the ice, deep inside Lycaeus. Few knew him as well as she did. They both knew she did not wish to embarrass him. They both knew she would not let that stop her. ‘My lord,’ she said. ‘The expeditionary fleet is struggling to contain the united forces of the Sodality. If we do not aid them, we will give the Sodality time to better coordinate their efforts at resistance, and the war here will drag on for months. Their fleet is waiting for an opportunity. If we break now, they will attack Fenc’s position.’

‘She’s right,’ said Branne. ‘I hate to let him go, but we have to strike now. Listen to Fenc, for the love of the crusade. Agarth is one man. Thousands of lives are at stake. We have to finish them now.’

‘Do you, Branne, dare to question my command. I am primarch–’

‘And we’re just the brats of prison scum?’ interrupted Branne. ‘A child I was when we first met, but no more. For thirty years I have fought at your side. We have known you since we all were children. I know you are wrong. Your plan was sound, but it has failed. This desire to pursue Agarth is driven by emotion. We must follow Fenc’s lead now.’

‘Do not address me this way, Branne,’ said Corax. He put some of his inner potency into his words. As a creature of the shadows, rarely did Corax allow his innate majesty to show through his studied human guise. Nothing outward changed, but a sense of immense might radiated from him. Branne flinched from his lord’s revealed glory, but pressed on.

‘I will not be quiet, when you lead us into disaster. Corax, I am speaking to

you as your friend.’

‘You will be silent!’ demanded Corax. His voice thundered. This time, he had no disagreement. ‘The oppressors of the weak can be shown no mercy,’ said Corax. He stared at his attendants, leaving them with no doubt of his resolve. ‘This is what the crusade is for. To raise men up and save them from the likes of Agarth. He must be punished for his genocide, or the freedom we bring to this system will be hollow indeed. Hunt him down, and make him pay.’

SIXTEEN

REPRESENTATIVE OF THE LEGION

Sergeant Belthann looked at Tensat disapprovingly. A glare like that was hard to take in a space as small as briefing chamber 86, and what parts of the room that did not shiver with Belthann's irritation, the sergeant filled physically. He was huge. Truly huge. Tensat was well aware the Space Marine could twist his head from his neck with one hand. He still gave Belthann a wounded look.

The Space Marine continued to stare at him.

'Have you finished?' said Belthann.

'What?' said Tensat.

'You are being less than serious about this endeavour.'

It was a week after the Salvation Day bombings. A disproportionate amount of that time had been taken up by Tensat and Belthann exercising their mutual mistrust. Tensat resented the Legion interfering, Belthann wasn't happy about working with an unmodified human – in fact Tensat got the impression Belthann thought non-legionaries beneath him. Tensat reckoned he had begun to irritate the sergeant within half an hour of their meeting.

The procurator mechanical kept out of the bickering. Just then he was hovering on the far side of the room, watching their exchange with irksome mechanical inscrutability. They were the only three present. A two-way mirror looked through into an empty interrogation chamber. The lights were out, and the auto-inquisitor folded up neatly on its rack. It lacked anything more threatening than pharmaceutical truth inducers. Corax disapproved of torture.

‘All right,’ said Tensat. ‘I’ll put it in more respectful language. All I’m saying is, what makes you say these “Children of Deliverance” are a large group? It could be a small band of malcontents, or even an individual, though I admit that’s unlikely.’

‘I am a member of the Shadow Wardens, the guardians of the primarch himself. It is my business to know. A small group would lack the resources to execute all these attacks. Consider the message.’

Tensat looked at the data-slate he held in his hands. The message was two minutes of vid claiming responsibility for a number of crimes against the tech-guilds.

‘It looked slickly made. They have a good imagifer. But that doesn’t mean much on its own.’ Tensat made an effort to sound conciliatory. ‘There have been any number of half-baked plots to attack the guilds since the primarch departed on the crusade. And the Mechanicum, for that matter. I’ve even had a few directed against the Legion itself.’

‘I was aware of them,’ said Belthann.

‘Are you sure? You sound surprised,’ said Tensat.

‘I am not. Discontent is everywhere. Humanity is inherently ungrateful.’

‘What do you expect? Give people freedom, and they get quite particular about how they are treated. They were promised a lot by the iterators. It hasn’t materialised yet.’ Tensat dropped the dataslate onto a pile of flimsies. A couple escaped the pile and sifted to the floor. ‘Look, forgive my suspicion, this just isn’t the sort of thing the Legion gets involved with. You don’t care what happens down here. Lycaeus is the Legion’s ground.’

‘Deliverance,’ corrected Belthann.

Tensat carried on unabashed. ‘What does Kiavahr matter to you?’ he said, letting some of his bitterness out. ‘We’re all slavers down here, right? You don’t care. You leave it to the likes of me to squabble with the likes of him.’ Tensat gestured at the procurator.

‘We are concerned with what happens here,’ said Belthann.

‘I’d say not very often,’ said Tensat.

Belthann leant on the desk. The metal creaked with his weight. ‘We are warriors, not enforcers. That is your role.’

‘Fine then. So explain to me why you are here now. Help me enforce the law.’

‘This message is directly addressed to the primarch, that is why I am here.’

Tensat snorted in disbelief. ‘You’re a little behind on how many people here want to catch his ear. It could be any number of lunatics. Does he spare time for them all, or indeed, any of them? Why are you here really?’ said Tensat. ‘Unless, there’s something else going on here that you are not telling me

about.’

Belthann presented a stony face and did not answer.

‘Fine. In that case, we can handle this.’ Tensat looked to the procurator mechanical for support. He burbled something unintelligible. ‘If we are going to work effectively together, you are going to have to trust me.’ Tensat glanced at the procurator meaningfully again. ‘Us.’

‘All right!’ Belthann rapped the table. Although he did so lightly, the objects on the surface jumped, and his gauntlet left three perfect knuckle indentations. ‘I have reason to believe that whoever is behind this spate of attacks on the guilds was trained by Corvus Corax himself.’

‘Really?’

Belthann nodded solemnly. His expression seemed strangely childish on such a wide face.

‘Now I am surprised,’ said Tensat. ‘Is it a legionary?’

‘No!’ Belthann said vehemently. ‘Impossible. An old comrade, perhaps. There were many who fought for Deliverance that were too old to be elevated to the Legion. We have our suspicions who it might be.’

‘One of Corax’s original insurgents?’ Tensat whistled.

‘That is why I am here. You have had nothing on this scale before,’ said Belthann. ‘You cannot handle this affair alone.’

‘So you do watch.’

‘Of course they do,’ said the procurator.

‘Decided to join in, have you?’ said Tensat.

‘Your attitude is annoying, Enforcer-Principal Diorddan Tensat,’ said the procurator. ‘I beg you to desist.’

‘Well, if you’ve any suggestions, procurator, I’m listening,’ said Tensat.

‘There will be more attacks,’ said Belthann. ‘We cannot avoid that.’

‘I agree when you say you’re not an enforcer,’ said Tensat. ‘You’ve come all this way to tell me you’ve noticed but you are still not going to do anything?’

‘I did not say that.’

‘You didn’t say very much of anything.’

A look of profound irritation passed over Belthann’s face.

‘Listen to me!’ the Space Marine said. His tone was a warning. Tensat took the hint.

‘All right, all right,’ he said. ‘I apologise. Please, speak.’

‘We must provoke an attack that we can control and turn to our advantage. That is the quickest way to lure out these insurgents, and capture them. If there is one of the old prisoners involved, there may be many. Their networks were tight.’

‘You mean bait a trap?’ asked Tensat.

‘You are going to use the guild representative as bait,’ said the procurator. ‘It is the logical course of action.’

‘I just said that!’ said Tensat.

‘You did not guess who the bait would be,’ said the procurator. ‘Sergeant Belthann wishes to use the guild representative as his lure.’

‘A target of our choosing,’ said Belthann. ‘A situation of our contrivance. A result of our prediction.’

‘That’ll be dangerous for the representative.’

‘The fate of the target is irrelevant. The capture of the criminal is our goal.’

‘I don’t think I can go along with this,’ said Tensat. ‘It will cause a lot of problems here if the representative is killed.’

‘You’re a guilder, but they don’t tell me you have any more affection for these slave-keeping bastards than I do, enforcer,’ said Belthann.

‘Maybe not, but we risk serious unrest. Civil conflict, even,’ said Tensat.

‘I was raised in the prison mines up there.’ Belthann’s eyes became flinty. ‘Third generation. I had done nothing, my parents had done nothing, my grandparents had done precious little, but it was enough to condemn my family for all time. If it were not for Lord Corax’s orders to leave guilders alone, I would probably be killing them myself.’

Tensat glanced at the procurator, then back to the legionary.

‘The fastest way to the resolution of this crisis is by using the representative,’ said Belthann. ‘He will be safe. If that is not to your liking, you can enjoy a stay at the Ravenspire until the situation is contained.’

Tensat scraped a fingernail along the table, and tapped once. ‘Fine. Fine then. I agree. I shall see what I can arrange, but if it goes wrong, I would be grateful if you offer up an explanation to the government instead of my head.’

In the corner, the procurator mechanical made a noise that might possibly have been a laugh.

SEVENTEEN

MORITAT

Visions of darkness assailed Fedann Pexx. Flights of black birds wheeled over battlefields where nothing moved except carrion feeders. Bodies lay in heaps, impaled on their own weapons. Smoke blew from fires across the land, harried by strong winds round the rims of blood-soaked hollows, and caressed the faces of the dead.

The arms and armour of the combatants altered without warning. One moment, they bore fanciful, archaic stuff, beaten metal draped in cloth of bright heraldries, soaked in the uniform crimson of blood. Swords lay by nerveless hands. Dead steeds lay atop their slaughtered masters. Then the scene would change and the warriors would be legionaries of the Raven Guard lying under a dry alien sky, their armour riven by bolt shells, their hands clasped about each other’s throats in poses of mutual fratricide.

Pexx saw this from above sometimes. Other times he wandered the landscapes of his torment physically, clad in robes as grey as ash, feet dragging in gory mud, hands wringing, for he could do nothing to help those who had died and was persecuted by feelings that there was something he could have done to stop it, if only he had acted sooner. What this averting action was, however, he did not know, and that only deepened his woe. Guilt raked him with dirty claws.

Mingled with these feelings were those of frustrated aggression. He resented not being present at the fight. He hungered to blood himself as the dead warriors had, to drive out the feelings of helplessness and impending doom

with battle fury.

These feelings gripped him, toyed with him, and cast him back into misery.

When he did not wander the battlefield, he roamed a dreary wood of grey mists and leafless branches, or a desert of bones, or a city where wan faces peered accusingly from unglazed windows.

When he emerged from the recesses of his own mind, he faced the total blackness of his cell. A Space Marine required a fraction of the light an unmodified human did to see clearly, but there was none at all in the cell. It was so perfectly proof against any intrusion of light that he could have been buried far beneath the surface of a lightless world. He sometimes fancied he was, until the throbbing of ship's engines and sporadic, distant noises of menials at work assured him he was not.

In the darkness he could not tell if his eyes were open or closed. He could not tell if he was dreaming or asleep. In time, the dark became populated by horrors of its own, and these blended with the visions he experienced in his mind's eye until the two were indistinguishable. Pexx had not known it was possible to feel so utterly dejected. If the Imperial Truth did not deny its existence, he would have said his soul had been plucked from his body, and dipped in a stinking tar rendered from the worst sins imaginable.

The sound of his own breathing became raw. He thought he might have turned into something less than human. Perhaps he had.

A time after Pexx had been incarcerated – how long was impossible to gauge – the door lock clunked. The faint blue light from the cell block corridor outside was dazzling, though it was no brighter than the first smudge of dawn.

Agapito stepped into the room. Pexx recognised his scent.

'How are you keeping, brother?'

Pexx shifted. His manacles clanked. He laughed at the question.

'Badly,' he said. 'I am left in here with my horrors. It is not a pleasant way to spend my time.'

'That is to be expected,' said Agapito sympathetically. Both of them were boy soldiers in Corax's rebellion. They had lived lives in cells like this, before the Emperor lifted them up to the stars. They had fought to prevent others having the same life. Now Pexx was back where they had started, locked up in the dark.

'This is an unpleasant place,' Agapito said.

'I am supposed to ride this out, see it through to the end. If I am to recover, first I must suffer.'

'That's almost… religious.'

Pexx closed his eyes and rested his head back against the wall.

‘I do not think it is working.’ He shook his head. His hair had been shaved down to skin when he came in. Now the bristles rasped against the rough metal. ‘I never thought I would fall to the sable brand. I did not think I had the temperament.’

‘It is not to do with temperament.’

‘Well then,’ said Pexx miserably. ‘I am sorry, captain, but I am not much in the mood for talking. If you have something to say to me, I would be grateful if you could say it and then leave.’ He smiled grimly to himself. ‘Unless you have come to let me out, in which case, I shall come with you.’

‘There is a chance of that,’ said Agapito.

Pexx sat forward. He turned to look at his captain and narrowed his eyes against the light.

Dim blue lit Agapito’s face like a moon in half-eclipse.

‘I am not recovered,’ he said.

‘You are not. But there is another way.’

‘Shadow Killers,’ said Pexx. He lifted his hands, making his chains chink. ‘It has come to the Moritat then.’

‘Serving with them might help you,’ said Agapito.

‘It might not. Kill or cure,’ said Pexx. ‘It is a shameful assignment.’

‘No longer. They have a new name, a new purpose.’

‘But still no honour,’ said Pexx.

‘Did you hear what happened?’ asked Agapito.

‘Some,’ said Pexx. ‘An Apothecary comes in every two days to feed and assess me. He talks. He says it helps to talk between bouts of isolation. That to shift from one state to another can jar the mind out of this blasted introspection.’

‘Vicente Sixx,’ said Agapito. ‘I have spoken with him.’

About my condition, Pexx thought. Neither of them said so.

‘Do you know about Agarth?’

‘I do. The anima-phage. What he did was terrible, worse than what I see in the visions. I am sorry it happened. It is a shame he escaped.’

‘We have found him, though it has taken precious time.’

Pexx sensed unhappiness in Agapito. The sable brand had sharpened his intuition. He didn’t detect Agapito’s mental state through the usual cues of facial expression or vocal tone; Agapito hid his emotions well. But somehow he knew that he was unhappy.

It was disturbing.

‘How long?’ he asked.

‘The search took weeks,’ said Agapito. ‘And there were some… questionable methods used to locate him.’

‘Such as?’ said Pexx.

Agapito would not be drawn. ‘Agarth has escaped to an outpost hidden within the upper reaches of the star’s corona,’ Agapito said. ‘The Moritat are to be sent in to disable it.’

‘You are here to offer me the chance to join them. They are killers. Mind-damaged. The worst of the Legion.’

‘That is true. Many of them are recidivists, but some of them, though, are sable brand like you and some of those who have recovered in the past did so through service in that dark brotherhood.’

‘Is it an order that I join them, captain?’ asked Pexx.

‘No order, but an offer. If you want my opinion, you should do it. More sable brand come through their trial by fighting than by sitting in these places and staring darkness in the face.’

‘A poetic way of saying going raving mad and tearing your own body apart,’ said Pexx.

‘Granted,’ said Agapito.

‘I will do it, of course.’

‘I thought you would say that.’ Agapito pressed a button on a small box hanging from his waist. Pexx’s manacles snapped open. His head spun when he stood. He had been sitting down for a long time.

‘When do we go?’ Pexx asked.

‘Right now,’ said Agapito.

The heat from the sun scorched them. Behind a metre of ceramite and ablative materials, they could still feel it. Agarth’s station was located on the edge of the star’s atmosphere where the heat was measured in the millions of degrees. How Agarth had constructed his hideout there was a source of debate among the Legion. Perhaps it dated from the times before, when man’s science was greater. However it was done, it had been made, this keep protected by wards of fire.

The station hung over boiling plasma. No void ship could fly so close to the sun. Munitions would detonate. Solid mass projectiles would evaporate. Laser and particle weapons would see their beams sent awry by the magnetic fields flexing around the star. Finding the station had been a feat in itself. In the end, the information was gathered from captives taken by snatch squads from the cities most closely aligned with Zenith-312.

Agarth no doubt felt safe where he was. But nobody was beyond the reach of the Raven Guard.

Launched from the tubes of the *Tenebrous*, the Moritat coasted towards the sun in boarding torpedoes.

Only a madman would fly so near to a star. The Moritat had enough madness to spare.

The Moritat in front of Pexx slammed his head repeatedly against his restraints. The rhythm of ceramite on plasteel increased tempo with each strike, then slowed, then sped up again. The warrior behind him chuckled darkly.

‘Andoro is at it again. He is. At it again!’ he growled. Despair lurked behind his laughter. ‘Banging his head.’

The remaining two were mercifully silent.

Here were the Legion’s misfits; the criminally minded who had slipped through recruitment screening, murderers from erstwhile Lycaeus who had taken to bad ways again, men whose humours were unbalanced by implant malfunction, and, among them, those who had fallen to the sable brand. Corax’s genetic curse. Some Space Marines enjoyed ranging alone without brotherhood; it left them free to murder in the dark unobserved. They requested the assignment. Pexx wished to meet that sort least of all. He imagined them all around him, waiting for him to fail so they could condemn him and kill him out of the sight of justice.

Black avians cawed in Pexx’s imagination. A pitiless well of misery bubbled over in his head, polluting his psyche. Intellectually he stood back from it, appalled at the effect his affliction had upon his spirits, but though he could attempt to remain detached, darkness laced his thoughts, so that his being became worthless rock, and the misery the veins of precious ore fate wished to drill out of him, obliterating his mind in the process.

He remembered sadness from his life before. When he was a boy there had been a plenitude of despair available to sample in the prison of Lycaeus, but what he endured now was something new, so concentrated no amount of mental effort could overcome it.

It did not matter, he told himself. I could be dead in a moment.

Boarding torpedoes had the highest chance of making the journey to the solar outpost. They were easy to hide in the chaotic torrents of radiation around the sun. But their survivability more than stealth forced their choice. The prow-baffling the torpedoes carried to shield them from the emissions of their melta arrays presented some protection from the sun. Even then the angle of insertion had to be precise. The prows had to be dead on to the star, or the torpedoes would melt like sticks of sealing wax.

As much additional shielding as the torpedoes could carry had been hastily added to their sides for the mission. It made little difference. Pexx felt the star’s endless burning through the wadding of the ceramite panels as if he were stood on the equator of a desert world. His armour pack whirred with

cooling activity. Soft runes blinked every twenty seconds on his helmplate display to remind him of the environmental dangers. The configuration was new to him. Moritat wargear was different to that of ordinary troopers.

They used the smallest size of torpedo, five-man infiltration tubes. An argument could be made that the twenty-eight-strong Moritat force could spread out more effectively that way, but in reality it was about minimising losses. Moritat were suicide troops, the duty given out of scorn or as a chance at redemption. They were not expected to survive. Those that made the crossing would have to fight their way through Agarth's Zenith-guard to the mission targets. Once the station was disabled, they had to find their own way off. Mission parameters were defined with their escape as an optional objective, as the briefing euphemistically put it.

Moritat was a young name for an old punishment. Pexx thought it fitting.

Through all this rumination he felt no regret. From the coldly rational part of himself, he saw the horror of his condition was not born of fear of death, but a hopelessness that his death would mean nothing. This small realisation gave him a foothold on sanity, and for a time the visions and the anguish abated. He was a warrior again, sealed in his little world of ceramite, waiting for a worthy battle to commence. He let his body go loose within his armour, let the vibration of the torpedo's engine lull him into a state halfway back from madness.

Retro-thrusters burst. Pexx slammed into the restraint cage as their ship decelerated rapidly. There came the roar of melta arrays and the greater impact of a torpedo on its target. Pexx was thrown about hard by the shuddering penetration into the outpost. They came to a violent halt, the door exploded outwards, the harnesses detached and before Pexx knew what he was doing, he was in a brightly lit corridor where the sharp smell of the void mingled with ferrofoam sealant and hot metal. The twin volkite serpentas he held in his hands came online of their own accord. Their paired plasma feeds snaking from his backpack warmed. The suit possessed a sophisticated targeting array. It too activated without his input, flooding his helm plate with a welter of information. The bright icons superimposed over his vision competed with the wheeling black birds infesting his imagination. Neither would let him be.

A few moments after that, he was killing again.

Agarth had protected himself well.

Automated defence points guarded the station's corridors. Every part of its interior was covered by picter units and more esoteric sensors. Combat servitors supplemented the fixed defences. Pexx encountered these first,

blasting them apart before they could open fire on him. Their places were taken by Zenith-guard.

The warriors garrisoning the station were an elite formation. They wore armour decorated with bold emblems in blue and red, and carried weaponry of more advanced make than their now dead counterparts aboard the home moonlet. Often the prime units of autocracies were elite only in name, good at terrorising civilians and marching in formation, but their vaunted abilities proved lacking when tested in combat. Pexx reflected that it was the soldiers defending popular governments, or with a strong national ethic that fought the best. Rarely did the tools of oppression make a good show on the battlefield.

Agarth's men were better than most, but not as good as some. Almost elite, he thought, as he advanced into a storm of fire. Flechettes ricocheted from his suit's reinforced front. Double hits from his paired volkites turned a man to meat-scented steam. Two of the dead soldier's companions broke and ran. The cowardice they displayed and the bravery of the men that stayed behind were not characteristics of brainwashed warriors. At some level, then, they had made the decision to come here freely and let their families die, thought Pexx. He slew those that had stood their ground. Their guns rattled on full automatic. Needle projectiles skipped off the curved surfaces of his Moritat armour, suddenly ceasing with the firers' deaths.

The Moritat suit was a modification of Crusade-pattern armour. It was slow, but more heavily armoured than standard plate, ideal for warriors expected to weather the attentions of the enemy alone, and forged to allow them to do as much damage as they could before they were slain. Enhanced auto-senses gave Pexx a superior situational awareness. Pexx thought these and other things to keep his mind occupied and the visions at bay. When he let himself slip into the fugue of combat, he was alarmed to find his inner horrors impinging on the outside world. The ghosts of screams that he at first took for genuine haunted his vox-pickup, and once, when he killed an officer of Agarth's men, his chest exploded with cawing black birds instead of gore.

He addressed the nature of the sights rationally to distract himself. Was the Legion's iconography influencing these hallucinations, or something else? Would a Xeric tribesman's hallucinations be different to the visions of a Lycaean?

Pexx's guns vented superheated steam as he strode into a three-way junction arranged like a horizontal Y. Tarry residue and body parts marked the deaths of thirteen guards. The remainder were falling back under the cover of smoke and blind grenades towards the station centre. A wall of chemical smoke and electrical arcing half hid them from his suit's systems. They were retreating to protect their master. Pexx let them go. A bullet would not end Agarth's life.

A swipe of his hand knocked flechettes tinkling from his chest.

He took the leftmost passageway towards his target. The fleeing Zenith-guard were too terrified to notice he was not following them.

Successive flights of stairs and short landings took Pexx out from the centre of the station. A thumbnail cartolith hanging by his right eye told him exactly where he was, but he would have known he was getting further out without it, for the temperature rose half a degree with every fifty metres he walked closer to the station's edge. Occasional sounds of fighting echoed down the corridors. Soon after insertion the Moritat had broken apart from one another. They fought alone, in the main. Pexx was grateful of that. The misery of the sable brand was compounded by his new status. He did not wish to share.

His helm chimed. He was near his target. A wall-mounted sentry gun swivelled towards him. He blasted it apart and strode past the sparking mess. The temperature increase quickened. Half a degree for every ten metres now.

There was a door set in the wall to his right. The passages were narrow down there to save space, though still tall to accommodate the Carinaeans' attenuated form. He turned awkwardly. The volkite attached to his right hand swivelled aside to allow him to grasp an annular twist-switch set into the wall. The mechanism was designed for the long fingers of a low-G-born human and his gauntleted hand would not fit. He poked at it with two fingers until he got it to turn. The door clunked back and rolled aside. Higher-pressure air blasted out of the room behind. It was searing, and stale. The chamber was not connected to the main ventilation system.

A platform ran around the inner three walls of a two-storey room, looking down onto large, humming mechanisms. A ruby energy field made the fourth wall, cutting in at a steep angle and wrapping itself around the machinery below. Past the shield a long radiation deflector vane extended into space. The magnetic field it projected sizzled with artificial auroras. Beyond, the sun walled space away. The star was too close to give any sense of its spherical nature, and appeared as a flat sheet of bubbling fire. It lit the room deep orange. There were no lumens. His volkites' charge cells cast odd blue highlights onto the angles of the walls. Pexx slipped gratefully into the bloody shadows.

The energy field was an atmospheric retainer combined with thermal shielding, but still the room burned with a furnace broil. The workings of Pexx's suit hit a fever pitch to keep him from cooking inside his armour. Where the cooler air of the corridor seeped into the room, a furious thermocline shimmered.

The room had the feel of a place men did not often go. Pexx walked over to

the single control console situated at the centre of the platform facing the sun. Its instruments were dark, save a few bright red lights. Gauges twitched like fitful dreamers.

He stared at them. His vox-beads hissed in his ears. Rarely had he been so alone as then. He welcomed the solitude. The sun blazed invitingly at him, coaxing him to step to the edge of the chamber, clamber over the machines and leap out into the void and the fires there. He would cease to be. The ravens clamouring in his skull would be consumed with him. He would be free. No more war, no more killing. One easy death, and it would all be done.

He took a step forward.

A hand appeared from nowhere to grasp at his elbow.

'Do not give in to the sable brand.' A Moritat stood where there had been nobody.

Pexx's right hand whipped up to press its gun against the warrior's left eye-lens. He did not move.

'Either by killing me, or yourself,' added the warrior. His armour lacked any form of identification, being as black and glossy all over as a raven's feathers.

Pexx deactivated the gun and brought it away. 'A Moritat Shadowmaster. You are truly one with all the gifts,' said Pexx sardonically.

'Making light?' said the Shadowmaster. 'That is good. You may survive your affliction.'

'You are an expert on this condition?'

'I am as expert as anyone can claim to be,' said the Shadowmaster.

Pexx experienced mixed emotions: relief that he may get better, a fresh tide of horror that it could happen again.

'Sometimes, we must face what we are lest we go mad,' said the warrior.

'Who are you?' asked Pexx.

'I am a friend. I am your brother.'

Pexx pulled away. The warrior's hand slid from his arm. He turned back to the console. He looked to his new companion. 'I would withdraw. As soon as I deactivate this machinery, we will be exposed to the full force of this star.'

'I am staying here,' said the Shadowmaster, with a note of sad humour, 'to make sure you do not remain.'

'As you wish,' said Pexx. The machinery was simple enough to work. He turned off the radiation vane then the stubby gravitic stabilisers ranged along the hull in its shelter. An alarm barked at him. Lights flashed, their output feeble in the face of the sun. His finger hovered over the field cutout button.

'Deactivate it, then follow me,' said the Shadowmaster. 'If you are quick, you will survive.'

Pexx's finger stabbed down decisively.

The field blinked out. Air gusted out explosively.

The raw power of the sun hit him like a blow. His suit let out so many warnings it sounded like it was screaming. The temperature indicator went from low amber to the very extreme of its grade range in an eye-blink. Ceramite plates creaked with sudden expansion.

‘Out. Now,’ said the Shadowmaster. He grabbed Pexx and hustled him from the room. Machinery exploded behind them. Alarms whooped. Fires caught on insulated wires.

Pexx was thrust into the narrow corridor. His armour steamed with evaporating paint, though it did not change colour; the metallo-ceramic beneath had been scorched as black as his livery.

The Shadowmaster made to shut the door. Pexx held up his hand.

‘Wait,’ he shouted over the howl of escaping air. He loosed a shot into the room, blasting apart the control console. ‘Just in case,’ he said. ‘Close it now.’

The Shadowmaster twisted the door lock. It banged shut. The decompression gale ceased.

‘We must be away,’ said the Shadowmaster. The wall of the corridor was beginning to glow. ‘This place will be unsafe in a few minutes.’

Pexx nodded. His armour was cooling but still hot. The smell of singed bodyglove tickled his nostrils.

They set out back the way they had come. Panicked shouts came at them down the stairs in the corridor head.

‘It looks like we will have to fight our way out,’ said Pexx.

‘That is not necessarily a bad thing for one in your condition,’ said the Shadowmaster.

They fought side by side for the rest of the mission. Pexx did not ask the Shadowmaster his name, and the Shadowmaster did not offer it. The station shook with explosions as other key targets were destroyed or disabled. Subtle movements told them the outpost was being pulled from its orbit by the star. They did not have long to escape, but no order to withdraw came.

Knowing they were doomed, Agarth’s guard fought desperately. Few of them fled any more. They had nowhere to go. More of the Moritat died, joining those who had failed to complete the journey from the *Tenebrous*.

The Shadowmaster wielded a one-handed cycler cannon. Its fusillades passed through their targets as if they were wet paper, riddling the walls with holes. Gas and water sprayed from ruptured lines. Fires burned wherever they passed. They walked undaunted into the worst of enemy weapons fire, the Shadowmaster using his uncanny abilities to stalk ahead while Pexx acted as decoy. Hundreds fell to them.

‘They are surprisingly numerous,’ said Pexx.

‘Agarth has worked out what we are doing, and has released the full force of his army to hunt us down. It is too late for that now.’

Among the troops were frightened technicians being hustled to undo the damage caused by the Moritat. Pexx and the Shadowmaster killed them without compunction.

‘The station is beyond repair,’ said the Shadowmaster, as he mowed down a group of men with his cannon. Their flechettes bounced from his battleplate. ‘But we must not give them the opportunity to try.’

‘You do not need to explain. I have thirty years combat experience,’ said Pexx, annoyed at the warrior’s tone. ‘I fought with Corax for Deliverance.’

‘Are you saying I do not have experience, or did not fight in the liberation?’

‘I am saying I do not need you to explain the craft of war to me,’ said Pexx, punctuating his words with shots from his volkites. The weapons were superb, keeping up a high rate of fire without overheating.

‘I believe you may be experiencing remission.’

‘Do you always talk so much?’ Pexx lobbed a shroud grenade down the corridor. Zenith-guard stumbled out of the smoke to be gunned down by the Shadowmaster.

‘I do!’ laughed the Shadowmaster.

‘A regrettable characteristic for one such as you,’ said Pexx.

‘Maybe,’ said the Shadowmaster.

They gained the third of the circular corridors running around the station. No place was untouched by the Moritat. Emergency lumens took over the roles of damaged lighting systems. Smoke ran along the ceilings in serpentine torrents. The walls were ragged and spitting sparks. Fires burned. Systems failed everywhere.

A wide-cast vox message called for attention. Pexx listened.

‘Fall back to the primary hangar bay.’ The speaker was a murderer named Kaedes Nex, drafted in from the 14th Company to serve as leader for the Moritat strike force, as much as the Moritat could be said to be led by anybody. *‘Our mission is accomplished. Secure means of transit. Leave one ship intact, destroy the rest.’*

Like flocking birds, the Moritat reached the furthest extent of their flight, turned back, and headed to rejoin their fellows.

Pandemonium reigned in the hangar approach tunnels. The Carinaeans were converging on the hangar as the retinues of differing lords sought to secure transit off the station before it fell into the sun. Elements of the Zenith-guard fought each other as well as the Raven Guard Moritat in their desire to escape. Pexx and the Shadowmaster approached a major way choked with corpses.

There were a few lordly Carinaeans among the dead, their complicated headgear and their beads marking them for what they were. Pexx stopped by one. His red robes were stained crimson by his blood, his finely boned face bled white. He lay surrounded by the bodies of his soldiers. Boltguns had finished them all.

'In death, we are all made the same,' he said to the corpse. 'Lacking motion and determination, all deeds are done. When we are dead, the only distinction we have is that which we did in life.'

'Then he died poorly,' said the Shadowmaster. 'Come. You are leaving.'

They made their way to the edge of their target. There was only one hangar, but it was extensive in size. Bolt fire rattled around its maintenance and landing bays. Four of five shuttles housed there burned. They were impressive machines, larger than a Legion gunship, with a transport capacity close to that of an Imperial Army drop-ship. Weapons blisters studded the hull and the stubby wings. The Legion had made short work of them. The sole remaining vessel was sheathed by the soapy glimmer of energy shields. Three Moritat fired a variety of weapons from the open ramp. Dead Zenith-guard carpeted the floor. More came into the hangar to replace those who had died, taking up positions of cover and the higher ground to fire at the Space Marines. They were becoming desperate, pushing on where before they would have held back. They traded mag-impelled flechettes with bolts. The bolts had the higher worth in terms of death.

Pexx and his companion crept up to an ingress point – one of many around the hangar periphery, and shot down a squad sheltering behind a loading rig a few metres from their position. He'd hit three, he thought. The Shadowmaster murdered the rest, his cycler cannon blasting seven men into chunks that fell down upon the deck to leak copious blood.

'Raven Guard, board enemy craft. We depart immediately.' Nex again. His cold voice contained no capacity for mercy. Anybody not on the ship when it was due to depart would be left behind. He would not wait.

'Now,' said Pexx to his nameless friend. He sprinted across the open ground between transport and hangar door without looking to see if the Shadowmaster followed. Flechettes thudded into him from several directions. A few pierced his ceramite with the accuracy of a torturer's needles, skewering vital systems. Gas whistled from the holes. Systems warnings blinked red across his faceplate. The power feed to his left leg became patchy.

Nine Moritat converged on the hangar – in all likelihood no more remained alive – announcing themselves with data bursts for their comrades and a plethora of technological death for their foes. They dashed from every direction towards the shuttle. According to Pexx's display, thirteen had made

it through the journey and the mission. A forty-six per cent survival rate set against all mission goals accomplished. For most other branches of the Legion, the figure would have been cause for punitive action against the commanders. For the Moritat it was a solid success.

Pexx ran up the ramp of the shuttle. Its engines were firing as he limped aboard, his armour grinding, his dragging foot kicking aside delicate metal meadowlands of embedded flechettes. Hands pulled him further within the craft. It shook with the force of its primitive motive units. The remainder of the Moritat ran in. They abandoned all caution, and entered the ship with their backpacks studded with glittering needles, their systems venting gas. Pexx glimpsed the warrior he had shared the battle with already aboard, somehow, and raised a hand. The Mor Deythan dipped his head, then sank into the shadows of a bulkhead like a black rock disappearing into oil. Something struck Pexx as wrong about that. With a sense of building dread, he went over to the place the Shadowmaster had been.

There was no one there.

‘Brother!’ he said to another Raven Guard who sat upon the bench. ‘Do you know the warrior who was here?’ he asked.

The man’s helm tilted up at him.

‘What warrior?’ he said.

‘We go, now,’ said Nex over the vox.

The roar of engines killed Pexx’s questions.

No more Moritat were in the hangar. The three covering the ramp turned and came inside. The Zenith-guard abandoned their positions and ran at the ship, firing recklessly, until the hull weapons of the shuttle opened up, and rent them into particles. Pexx’s last sight of the hangar was a man vanishing in a flash of dispersing energy – then the ramp closed, and the ship nosed up. There was a momentary pause as it swung about-face and blew out the hangar doors, then a spike in temperature, and the sickening feeling of sudden exposure to a high-gravity field. The ship whined piteously as its Moritat hijackers bullied it away from the sun, the temperature climbing to deadly heights. Suddenly, they were in the shadow of the dying station and clear, accelerating fast. No weapons fire troubled them.

Pexx was exhausted, but at peace. The gnawing sense of doom had left him. His pessimism was gone. He wondered if the Shadowmaster was real, or if he was a manifestation of the sable brand. Either way, he offered the warrior silent thanks. Without him, he would be dead by his own hand.

Pexx rested his head against the inner wall of the transport bay hull, and let the shaking of the craft lull him into sleep.

No ravens darkened his dreams.

EIGHTEEN

SAVIOUR'S VENGEANCE

The entire legionary force was arrayed around the *Saviour in Shadow*, bearing witness to the primarch's sentence upon Arch-Comptroller Agarth.

Corvus Corax brooded on the command throne. His crew went about their work in silence under the glaring eye of the Carinaean sun. The oculus shutters were open, the reactive armourglass turned up to near full opacity to shield the deck from harmful radiation. The sun occupied most of the view and only a thin curve of black, writhing with coronal flares, hinted at the void beyond.

Having the shutters withdrawn from the oculus presented many dangers. The *Saviour in Shadow* was very close to the star, its human eyes and machine systems blinded by it. Without the metres of armour the shutters gave, the command deck was vulnerable to suicide runs by enemy ships or the hyper-range weaponry of the floating cities. But Corax wanted to watch.

The outpost was falling into the sun. Gravity impellers and engines disabled, the Carinaean star exerted its undeniable pull upon the station's mass. From Corax's perspective the outpost appeared as a black silhouette dropping slowly, almost gracefully, into the sea of fire, but the primarch saw through the optical illusion. The station was travelling at vast speeds and accelerating rapidly. Only the distance it must travel and the relative enormousness of the sun granted its seeming dignity.

Within a hololithic projection sphere a light-spun model floated. Corax had the device set to a thermal view, showing the dying orbital as a blended

pattern of whites, oranges and, upon the surface pointing away from the sun, a faint trace of cool red.

A sole voice gabbled, that of Agarth, broadcast over the vox into the bridge, and sent on to the remaining cities by the *Saviour in Shadow*'s communications staff. Nearly four hours had passed since the Moritat had returned to the *Tenebrous*. Four hours of pompous declamations of the sovereignty of the Thousand Moons and ranting denunciations of the Imperium. All the while the temperature aboard the station increased. For short periods, Agarth was silent, but then his anger or his fear would get the better of him and he would begin anew. Corax ordered no one to reply. Similarly, the multiple requests for remote audience sent by Admiral Fenc went unanswered. The business with Agarth must be concluded first.

A second, larger hololithic ball showed the ongoing battle against the remaining thousand cities prosecuted by Fenc. The miniature worlds had arranged themselves into an admirable defence in depth. The Sodality's armada sallied out from this complex, ever-shifting fortress, delivering punishing blows against the Twenty-Seventh Expeditionary Fleet even as it wallowed under constant bombardment. Imperial Army forces, including the Raven Guard's allied Therions, were taking the cities one by one, but over the weeks the toll in lives and ships was high. Some of the primarch's officers were unhappy about his prosecution of the war. All of Fenc's were, but Corax was resolute. Justice must come first. He watched the strategic display as a ship marker flashed and its data tag turned red, blinked and faded away.

He turned his eyes back upon the falling station.

Some of the station shields remained active. A misty veil of energetic particles streamed upwards around it, painting in the solar wind in vivid colour. There was a beauty to this death that Agarth did not deserve.

'Time to station destruction,' said Corax quietly. His words cut through Agarth's angry rhetoric like a las-scalpel.

'Twelve minutes, my lord,' responded the augury watch officer. 'The last of their thermal shields are failing.'

A yellow flame burst upwards from the station, hardly visible against the greater fires of the sun.

As the station began to break, so did its master. Agarth's speech suddenly changed.

'Please!' he said, his voice distorted by the sun's mighty electromagnetic roar. *'Please, I understand what I did was wrong. I should have listened. I should have given your proposal the attention it deserved. If you rescue me, I promise we shall return to negotiations. I can speak with my fellow lords of the Thousand Moons. The Sodality has seen your might, my lord. We can*

reach some accommodation. I can be a powerful ally to you!' He went on in this vein for a few minutes, continuing without pause even when men began to scream in the background. The station glowed so brightly in the thermal image its shape was lost. Through the oculus it became hard to see, for the colour of the hull was changing to match that of the sun.

'It is time,' said Corax. He stood from his throne, and bade the hololith be activated. 'Arch-Comptroller Agarth,' he said. 'I stand in judgement of you not as a conqueror, but as all moral men must stand in judgement of tyrants wherever they are encountered.'

'Please, listen to me!' Agarth attempted to speak back, but Corax's voice rode the arch-comptroller's words down, trampling them into nothing.

'When we arrived here, you were among the most vocal in defence of this system's right to govern itself. In support of your arguments, you cited the defence of the people against outside tyranny as being supreme in your duties as a leader. And yet, when faced with certain military defeat, rather than surrendering and saving the lives of those you were bound to safeguard, you destroyed their minds, turning them into unreasoning creatures simply to stall my warriors' advance. You murdered hundreds of thousands of people to prevent your death. And yet here we are. Your end was inevitable. You are dying, arch-comptroller. As the temperature rises within your refuge, and your flesh roasts upon your bones, you shall see why this had to be done. The Emperor of Mankind sent out His crusade to save humanity from creatures like you. You, at least, will remain aware of what fate awaits you, unlike the poor souls you condemned to mindless hunger to save your own worthless life. This judgement of fire I pronounce upon you, Arch-Comptroller Agarth. I made a promise that mine would be the last face you should see. It has come to pass. So shall all oppressors die by my hand.'

'Curse you! Curse you and your Emperor! I curse you forever. Why should we be slaves when we were emperors already? Why should… Why…' Agarth made a choking sound, and began to scream.

'You reveal your true colours, as all men will when faced by death,' said Corax. 'Goodbye, arch-comptroller.'

For an entire minute Agarth screamed. The channel growled with stellar interference, but his screaming remained audible until, with a pathetic flare of yellow fire no more mighty than a spitting candle, the station burned up.

'It is done,' said Corax.

His crew looked to him.

'Order the Legion away from the sun. Signal Admiral Fenc and inform him the Raven Guard will join the battle. Send messages without cypher. Broadcast Agarth's last three minutes on constant loop throughout the system.

All these petty lordlings will rue the day they declined the Emperor's generosity.'

The sun's blazing ocean moved as the prow of the *Saviour in Shadow* swept around with gathering speed, replacing orange fire with ink-black void.

'Let them know I am coming.'

NINETEEN

BELTHANN'S GAMBIT

Tensat lurked in the crowd. The Raven Guard weren't the only ones in the sub-system with infiltration skills. The compact omnispex dragging at his pocket would give him away if he were challenged, but he wouldn't be. He hid the device's weight with a stoop and a limp suggestive of an old industrial injury. There were many shift workers with genuine disabilities in the crowds. He looked like any other.

That afternoon there were two traditions to be upheld, one new, one old, bringing the twelve-week cycle of Salvation to a close. At the thirteenth striking of the clock, as the Kiavahrans reckoned it, the guild representative would emerge from the marble balcony of the Old Guildhouse to give the traditional blessing of the Technocracy. This was the tradition. After a short, dry speech he would put on his best false smile and renew Kiavahr's oaths of fealty to the Mechanicum and to the Emperor.

The prices paid for influence, thought Tensat. For all their grumbling and their subordination to the Mechanicum, the tech-guilds were still powerful.

Tensat had mixed feelings about the ceremony. Being of middling-rank tech-guild stock himself, it rankled to see his people reduced, but although he tried his best to hide it, Tensat was an honourable man, and the histories taught him at the scholam of the Lycaean prison moon had curdled his blood. The tech-guilds deserved what they got. Personally he felt he did not deserve to suffer for his ancestors' wrongs, but that was what the Lycaeans had endured before the coming of the primarch. Justice delivered, of a kind. Life could not be

perfect. Solutions invariably begat fresh problems. Good men were never as good as they maintained. Life went on, and he was determined to preserve the peace. Nevertheless, he was in his most private thoughts sceptical of the Great Crusade. Pantomimes like this did not help.

'Concentrate.' The procurator mechanical's machine grating emanated from a vox-bead buried deep in his ear.

'I am,' he subvocalised. 'This is me concentrating.'

'Your brainwaves suggest otherwise.'

'There are people who would call me a traitor for speaking with you,' Tensat said.

'There are other people who would call you a traitor for defying these assassins,' said the procurator mechanical. *'We all must pick our sides.'*

'We're all on the same side, aren't we?'

'Concentrate!' repeated the procurator mechanical snappishly.

Tensat grinned.

The promise of rain was no deterrence to the large crowd gathered in the square ready for the ceremony. A heavy security presence of enforcers and the Mechanicum's army allayed fears of a repeat of the Salvation Day bombing.

The trick for Tensat had been to make the security look lax enough to be tempting to the terrorists, without revealing it to be deliberately lax. It was a difficult balance that kept Tensat awake for a week, and his nerves were still frayed. He held his gaze forward. Trying not to look at all the possible sniper's nests he'd identified around the Old Guildhouse was a trial.

The guildhouse clock ticked its way towards the thirteenth hour. Mechanical figures capered out of plasteel doors either side of the face. They were marvellous devices forged in a greater era, but they reminded Tensat of the terrifying folk tales his father had told him of the days of the Dark Ages, when mankind's slaves turned upon them.

Looking back on it, Tensat thought his old man had enjoyed frightening him.

A fanfare announced the guild representative. He came out onto the balcony at a speed he probably thought of as regal, but which Tensat thought made him look doddering. He bestowed a wave and a smile upon the crowd. There were a few half-hearted cheers. Most of the people there couldn't care less about the speech and were waiting for the traditional handouts that came at the close of the ceremony. Tensat couldn't blame them.

'Don't come any further out,' Tensat muttered under his breath. The representative was too close to the edge of the balcony, leaning out to wave at more of his supposedly adoring public. He was supposed to stay near the back.

'Why are you agitated?' asked the procurator.

‘He’s making it easy for them,’ subvocalised Tensat. ‘My ideal conclusion to today is an alive representative and a dead rebel.’

‘My dear fellow citizens,’ began the representative, ‘it is thirty-two Terran years since the Emperor came here, and the great saviour, Corvus Corax, brought freedom to all of our people from the old order!’

A ragged cheer went up. The proletariat were poorly educated, but some of them were aware of how little things had changed, and dared to stare bleakly at their better who, despite the primarch’s ideals, remained in power. Rain began to fall.

‘The populace of Kiavahr and of Deliverance stand united as part of the greater Imperium of Man. It is my privilege to appear here today as your guild representative to commemorate this momentous occasion in our history. The injustices of the past are over. Together we look forward to a glorious, shared future within the Imperium, and in partnership with our friends of the Mechanicum of Mars. The centuries have given mankind many tragedies to overcome–’

Later, Tensat reflected that the assassin had a sick sense of humour, timing her gunshot then. A single crack troubled the air. The guild representative was enveloped in the flare of light from a refractor field. It did him little good. He fell dead with a neat hole drilled through his forehead. Armed guild troops sprang from their hiding places and began to blaze away at whatever caught their eye. Innocent people died.

The crowd scattered.

Tensat employed a few choice curse words. ‘This is Tensat. Stop firing into the crowd!’ he voxed openly. He abandoned his disguise, setting his shoulder against the flow of people. He held his ground as fleeing workers slammed into him, wincing at every one of tomorrow’s bruises.

‘They used a shield piercer! Where did they get that? Who the hell are these people?’ shouted Tensat. He pulled out his omnispex. The readings pointed him to a building half a kilometre away. He stared around it wildly, seeking the location of the shooter.

‘I have the assassin’s location, if it is of use,’ said the procurator.

‘Give it to me,’ said Tensat. He turned and joined the flow of people running towards enforcer transports skidding into the square.

‘She is fleeing west along Recatalysation Way in a groundcar,’ said the procurator.

Tensat pulled out his badge and ran at a junior-level enforcer skimming down to ground level on a grav-bike.

‘I’m going to need this,’ he said, half pulling the man from his seat. Armoured enforcers were pouring out of the vehicles. For fear of alerting the

assassin, Tensat had told them nothing about the true nature of the operation, and they were charging about ineffectually, arresting people at random, bursting into buildings and charging upstairs, unaware that the killer was long gone. He had to act now. In a few moments Mechanicum forces would arrive to add their firepower and misunderstanding to that of the guild troops and the enforcers, with all the arguing over jurisdiction and responsibility that would entail.

Tensat gunned the engine, setting the grav motor to maximum repulsion and pushed up into the sky, the sudden acceleration squashing him into the padded saddle.

'Give me a direct trace on her, procurator,' shouted Tensat over the blast of wind.

The pict screen embedded in the bike fairing blinked on, and the procurator mechanical used some technological witchery to display a cartograph for Tensat. A pulsing red dot was dashing along the lines of streets, jinking dangerously between slower-moving traffic. Tensat banked the bike around. The powerful repeller accelerated him to several hundred kilometres an hour. He dived down between the metal canyons of Kiavhar's surface, polluted rain stinging his eyes as he searched out the assassin's car.

He nearly overshot as the car slewed wildly into a side street. He had a brief flash of a figure tumbling from the driver's compartment and sprinting away. The rain was coming down hard now, soaking Tensat's disguise in metal-scented water. His skin tingled and his eyes stung at the touch of the toxic downpour. He should seek shelter.

He threw the grav-bike into reverse, clinging on to avoid being hurled over the control column. It rebelled at the sudden deceleration, forcing him to wrestle hard to bring it round. The stabiliser fins raked on the facade of a tenement block, and the machine rolled to the left, but by then he was slowing. He circled down, punched the landing gear button and set the craft down next to the groundcar.

Greasy raindrops slapped into his hair. The few people on the street were hurrying into building overhangs to escape the rain. Chemical reek burned his throat as he ran.

'Do you still have her?' he voxed.

'A door into a silo cellar, two hundred metres from your position.'

Tensat ran. Puddles grew quickly in the rain. The rockcrete was slippery underfoot. He drew his gun, the sight of it making people sheltering along the edges of the alleyway shrink back.

The assassin had left the door open. He slowed, his gun in a two-handed grip. He moved quickly on the door and went through, gun up to cover both

sides, sweeping left to right, knowing full well that if the killer was waiting on the wrong side, his decision not to go right to left would lead to his death.

Nothing. A sloping corridor plunged down steeply beneath the silo. Tubby chemical reservoirs loomed overhead, closely ranked and imposing.

'Where is Belthann?'

'He is coming,' said the procurator mechanical.

Tensat ducked back out and searched the sky. Dirty clouds rubbed against one another. 'I don't see anything.'

'He told me he would be with you soon.'

'He's bloody late! We should never have listened to him. This was a bad idea,' said Tensat. He paused. Rain drummed off his coat. 'I'm going after her.'

'I advise you to wait,' said the procurator.

'If you were here instead of me, then you would get to make that decision. But you aren't.' Tensat ran into the tunnel, gun ahead of him, heart thumping.

The tunnel went downward quickly, turning back on itself in a series of descending switchbacks that Tensat approached with adrenalised caution. The lights flickered there. Power was inconstant. He was going into the undercity, a place enforcers avoided outside of purgation sweeps. Alone, he was in danger.

'Enforcer Tensat,' the procurator mechanical's voice buzzed in his ears. *'I'm losing your trace. You are engaging in perilous decision making. Stop, and wait for backup. Belthann is on his way. Let him apprehend the suspect.'*

'Not now!' gasped Tensat. The procurator's voice broke up as he headed deeper into the undercity.

He rounded another corner. A woman was there, suddenly facing him. She was a bit younger than him, with poorly chopped hair and a face of a type he found attractive. They stared at each other in shock a moment, until she loosed a shot at him. He ducked. She missed, and ran off.

Tensat followed. The corridor bottomed out there into a large, low-roofed space full of support pistons for the city above. It was a good place for an ambush. The assassin dodged between the supports. He shot three times, his las-bolts picking molten holes in the metal. She reached the wall and skidded off to the right to barge through a sheet plasteel door, sending it booming into the dusty rockcrete walls. Tensat snapped off another shot. The las-pulse lit up the dark with a flicker-blink ruby glare that imprinted itself on his retinas. Dazzled, he nearly missed the opening, but stumbled through onto the head of a short flight of stairs. A return slug shot zinged up the stairway, breaking powder from the wall. If the woman had stopped then, she might have dropped him with a second round before he recovered, but to Tensat's good

fortune she took to her heels again, the slap of her boots receding down the corridor at the foot of the flight, then skipping down another set of stairs.

Tensat advanced quickly but did not run. He kept his gun up. They were on the very fringes of the undercity. No power ran in that part. Dying biolume panels lit the corridor, the bacteria in them starving to death for want of nutrient replacement. Several were blotchy glows that illuminated only themselves. The rest gave off a green, fungal light more fitted to primeval forest floors. The passage at the foot of the stairs was short. The second stairway longer than the first. Tensat stepped downwards. His feet crunched in grit fallen from the rotting walls. Black slime grew down the centre of water stains streaking the grey rockcrete. It was getting hotter. He walked as quietly as he could, fearing that the thunder of his heart and his snatched breaths would give him away. He could no longer hear the sound of running. Either the woman had outpaced him or she was waiting for him.

The last step. He came off it softly, gun ready. The way ahead was straight and even more dimly lit than the passageway above.

The wall had given out and rubble slumped into the corridor, a long time ago by the look of it. Tensat flattened himself against the wall and slid along to the pile of rockcrete chunks.

It will be now, he thought.

He threw himself across the corridor. A bullet shaved his cheek. Tensat returned fire before he hit the opposite wall. Again, tracks of las light streaked his vision. He hit the wall, let himself bounce from it and fall down, dropping into cover at the foot of the fan of rubble. He kept his gun trained down the corridor. His heart hammered louder than ever. If the woman had a grenade, he was dead.

His vox-beads crackled. The ghost of the procurator’s voice hissed at him, but his words were unintelligible. The rockcrete there must have been thick to block Mechanicum comms. He’d gone deeper than he’d realised.

After four minutes of lying in the dirt he had had enough and got up.

Nobody shot him.

Tensat stepped over the rubble. A dark shape lay in the dimness ahead where the corridor opened out into a wide pipe. A heavy door had once closed the corridor off from the pipe, but only the surround was still in place. The control panel to operate it was a rusty hole sprouting wires which dust had turned all the same colour.

The woman lay in the intersection. A line of smoke spiralled from a wound in her chest. He’d hit her right in the heart.

‘Don’t move,’ he said, just in case. He kicked her foot. All signs of life had fled.

‘I’ve got our assassin,’ he voxed. A broken jag of words blurted back at him. ‘Procurator?’

He bent down to rifle through her pockets. Nothing. No identification. He had a suspicion her citizen ident tattoos would be missing or faked.

‘A ghost,’ he said. ‘Who are you working for?’

‘Me,’ said a voice from the shadows. The muzzle of a pistol, cool in the warm environs of the undercity, pressed against Tensat’s temple. ‘Drop your weapon. No one need die, least of all you.’

Tensat raised his hands slowly. He let his gun go. It swung around the trigger guard, and fell to the floor. A foot kicked it away. Tensat strained his eyes sideways, but could not see who had him. There was a hand holding the gun, white from subterranean living. It was large. The rest of the man was lost in the dark.

‘I’m not alone,’ warned Tensat. ‘Others are coming.’

‘I’m counting on it,’ said the man. ‘You are very brave, coming down here on your own. Do you feel you have done your duty, enforcer?’

Tensat pulled a face.

‘When a killer who lurks in the dark engages with you like this, it’s never for the sake of a chat,’ he said.

‘Really,’ said the man. The gun pushed ever so slightly harder against Tensat’s head. He felt the metal rub against the bone of his skull through the thin skin of his temple.

‘Yes, really,’ said Tensat. ‘The usual reason for this kind of speech from someone like you is to gloat, and to exert power before you kill. Hope and despair season the meat of murder. This is your prelude. You can save it for someone who gives a damn.’

‘You think I’m going to kill you?’

‘I’d say it was the most likely outcome,’ said Tensat, surprised at how little he feared death. ‘Maybe I’ll get a posthumous medal.’

‘Whereas you are playing for time,’ said the man.

‘I am,’ said Tensat. ‘You can’t blame me, even though in a lot of these situations, it doesn’t do any good.’

‘Perhaps it has in yours,’ said the man.

Legionaries appeared from both directions of the drainage pipe, Belthann at their head. Their size alone should have made their approach obvious but they had contrived to approach unobserved, even in their hulking war-plate. Cynical though he was, Tensat couldn’t help but be impressed.

‘Hello, Belthann,’ said the voice.

A dozen guns trained on the speaker’s location to the side of Tensat. He had almost enough faith in the prowess of the Legiones Astartes that they could

gun the man down and not him.

‘Do you remember me?’ said the man.

‘Errin,’ said Belthann. ‘I remember you. Let the enforcer go.’

‘You do recognise me.’ Errin was genuinely pleased. ‘I thought you might not, although we fought together for long enough.’ He withdrew his gun from Tensat’s head. ‘Go on, enforcer. I have no need of you now. You were wrong, just remember that. I did not wish to kill you.’

Tensat rubbed his head and walked over to Belthann. A residue of weapons oil clung to his face. ‘You know him?’ he asked. He peered down the pipe. He still couldn’t see his captor, although he was fairly sure he was looking right at him.

Belthann sounded inhuman behind the hard lines of his helmet. ‘He was a friend of mine once, a long time ago. Come out Errin. There’s nowhere to run.’

‘Who says I want to run?’ The shadows breathed, and out stepped a tall man who smiled at Belthann warmly. In the heat of the undercity he wore a short-sleeved tunic, revealing arms swollen with stimulated muscle growth. Despite his physical presence, he was nothing compared to the legionaries. He was sixty years old at least, and he looked it, the scuffs and wear of hard living adding to his age. His thinning hair was shaved down to a grey stubble. Crow’s feet clawed at the corners of his eyes. Scars upon his face spoke of old wars.

Errin’s smile was a sick expression, half predatory, half desperate. ‘The years have been kinder to you than I,’ he said.

‘You are behind all this?’ said Belthann.

‘I am.’ He held out his arms, wrists together. ‘I am the Children of Deliverance. I have murdered a dozen guilders. I planned the bombing of the Saviour’s Day parade. I ordered the assassination of the guild representative. I confess to all of these crimes, Belthann.’ He smiled again. ‘You better arrest me.’

TWENTY

OLD FRIENDS

The reduced Twenty-Seventh Expeditionary Fleet returned to Kiavhar under Corax’s command. Without celebration, its ships put in to the planet’s docking facilities. The vessels were marked by hard fighting. Their numbers were depleted, and the regiments ferried aboard the transports accompanying them had many holes in their ranks. Senior strategos reckoned eighty-seven thousand lives lost as the price for Corax’s vengeance. It was said, openly and angrily in some quarters, that the primarch had neglected his duty.

There were rumours about the action at Carinae, but they did not go far. The Terran authorities regarded Corax’s decisions during the compliance regrettable enough to hush up. No remembrancer reports were released beyond the blandest data recording the integration of the Sodality into the Imperium. The regiments sent to garrison the Thousand Cities were told little about their taking. The lack of news was not unusual. The Raven Guard often operated in the shadows. Corvus Corax did not care much for recognition – for him the doing of the task was reward enough – but in this case the silence surrounding the campaign was generated purposefully.

Primarchs should not be seen to make mistakes.

Corax sank into pensiveness and spoke little to his sons. Only the brothers Agapito and Branne Nev attempted to discuss the recent compliance, until Corax called them into his personal chambers in the Ravenspire, and they came out subdued. After that, they let him be.

The Emperor undoubtedly knew of His son’s behaviour. What He thought of

it, none could guess.

The lifter hummed rapidly down through multiple levels of the Raven Guard fortress. Deliverance was small, its mass low, but after the feather touch of the Thousand Moons' gravity, Corax felt weighed down by his own being.

Frictionless wheels whirred a deepening song. Magnetic brakes slowed the lifter. The utilitarian screen displayed a low number. They were not far from the Red Level, the place where in blacker times the wardens of Lycaeus had tormented their prisoners. Corax looked at the back of Belthann's head. He wondered a moment if his sons were wayward enough to employ that dread floor of the Ravenspire against his ban, but the lift slowed to stop five levels above, and the doors opened.

'He is this way, my lord,' said Belthann.

'He allowed his capture,' said Corax.

'He did.' Belthann thought a moment before continuing, unsure of Corax's mood. 'My lord, may I speak openly with you?'

'Any of my sons might,' said Corax flatly.

Belthann was not sure if that meant it was safe to proceed or not. He decided he should. 'You are giving Errin what he wants, my lord. He has been waiting these last two months to speak with you.'

'I am,' said Corax. 'But anyone who fought at my side during the deliverance of Lycaeus should be able to speak with me. I owe him that much, before I execute him.'

Belthann stopped, surprising Corax. 'Do you owe him anything? He killed to secure an opportunity to speak with you. He jeopardised the peace on Kiavahr, for what? Vanity?'

Corax gave Belthann a hard, avian stare. 'Perhaps that is why I should speak with him. To find out why he did what he did.'

'My lord,' said Belthann. 'He has told me some of his reasoning. My brother Shadow Wardens think he has lost his mind.'

'Do you?' asked Corax.

'I do not,' admitted Belthann.

'Then why are you challenging my decision?'

'Because, my lord, I fear you are going to try to justify yourself to him.'

'And what concern is it of yours if I do?' said Corax.

Belthann looked up to his gene-father with a boldness Corax admired. 'You are my father and my saviour, my lord. You do not have to justify yourself to anybody.'

Corax stared at Belthann for several seconds.

'I do what I must, sergeant, not what I please. Take me to the prisoner, then

leave me. I wish to speak with him alone.’

The cell was the sole room with power on the floor. Little Legion activity took place around the Red Level. The air was consequently stale with a backtaste of oil and the lumens flickered from long inactivity. Corax had little need of cells and less liking for them. He had devised other punishments for miscreants. Those who broke his laws must serve, or die, so Errin was all alone.

‘Corax,’ Errin said, rising from his chair when the primarch entered the cell. The chains binding his wrists and ankles rattled as he lifted them to show. ‘Overkill, don’t you think? When this was a prison, I escaped it, but now it is a legionary fortress I doubt I could.’

‘Errin,’ said Corax. The traitor reflected in his jet-black eyes. Errin smiled, as if they were sharing a secret.

‘It is good to see you, Corvus,’ he said. ‘Tell me, how are the Nev boys? How is Ephrenia?’

‘They are well, though ashamed to hear of what you have done.’ Corax surveyed Errin. He had become a fanatic, but he was not mad.

‘I thank you for seeing me.’

‘There were so many people who fought for me against the overseers of Lycaeus,’ said Corax emotionlessly. ‘Do you think I have time to speak with them all? Tell me why you did what you did. I have greater matters than your fate to deal with.’

‘Then why did you come at all?’

‘I am curious,’ said Corax. ‘We fought on the same side to bring peace to this moon and its mother planet, and yet you jeopardise that. Is it bitterness, because you were too old for implantation? I do not value your efforts in the liberation any less for you not becoming a legionary. You could have lived out your life in honour.’

‘You think this is about power? You think this is about me not becoming one of your so-called sons?’ Errin laughed hard. ‘I don’t want the power offered by the Emperor!’ he said.

‘Becoming a member of the Legion is a responsibility, not a gift of power,’ said Corax.

‘If you say so,’ shrugged Errin. ‘Do you honestly think all men made into legionaries feel that way? Do you not think some of them exult in their strength?’

‘Most understand that it is a responsibility,’ he said. ‘Those that abuse their gifts are judged and treated accordingly.’

Errin sat upon the hard fold-out bunk that was the only feature of the room.

His chains rattled after him.

‘Well,’ he smiled, and pointed a finger, ‘they are not the only ones with responsibilities. I’ve been doing all this for you.’

‘Is that so,’ said Corax.

‘You left the job here half-done, Corvus Corax. The guilds are in power still, the people suffer like they always did. I wanted you to see.’

‘The people are free,’ said Corax. ‘You are wrong.’

‘They are free to suffer,’ said Errin. ‘You abandoned us, Corax. The Emperor doesn’t care for men. Our struggle here didn’t matter to Him. If it did, why did He give our world to the Mechanicum? We’ve got nothing in common with them. Their religion is offensive to good sense. Worshipping machines!’ He let his derision show.

‘The Emperor has a plan beyond either of us,’ said Corax. ‘I have seen only part of it. I assure you all will be well. Mankind will regain its rightful rulership of the stars.’

Errin shook his head. ‘Corax, Corax. The Emperor is a tyrant. The position of the Mechanicum here is His hypocrisy in plain view! Promulgating this Imperial Truth from one side of His mouth, blessing the superstitions of the Martians from the other.’ He looked pityingly at Corax. ‘You’ve been duped, the one man we thought was beyond all domination of will or body. You’re a disappointment.’

‘You have no idea what is at stake.’ Corax stared at him impassively. ‘No idea at all. There are forces at work in this universe that defy language to describe. I cannot govern here as people wish. I cannot be here for the people. They suffer. I know. But human beings suffer everywhere. There are worlds where the worst possible things you can imagine happen as a matter of course, things that make the horrors of the Red Level seem mundane and kind. I cannot be here to adjust the lives of the people minutely. I have billions to save.’

‘So you have abandoned the fight,’ said Errin.

‘I fight the same fight, on a far bigger scale,’ said Corax.

‘What of justice?’

‘Justice takes a long time to build, but it will come.’

‘You’re wrong. Justice cannot be compromised. You can’t live by half principles, Corax. What is true in one place is true in all places, at all times. It cannot be one way here and another there. You are vengeful when it suits you, yet you let our tormentors live.’

‘I am vengeful. I was vengeful at Carinae and castigated for it. Justice will prevail, but at this time, vengeance would not suit here,’ said Corax. ‘I have set aside vengeance against the tech-guilds. They have their part to play in the

Imperium. This world will thrive, in time. All worlds will. A golden age is coming, but first we have to fight for it.'

'So justice is on hold?'

'Every world taken in the name of the Great Crusade is a step towards fairness for all.'

'What of every death of every hungry child here at Kiavahr? Is that not an injustice? Every man of Deliverance turned away from work, every act of corruption. Are these not crimes?'

Corax sighed. He had had similar discussions with himself. 'Sometimes we must sacrifice our personal feelings, the betterment of our own lives, for the common good. The sacrifices I ask of others are no greater than those I undertake. I face a lifetime of war. Do you think I wish to live a killer? Every battle I fight sees my sons die. I have expunged civilisations for the sake of the greater community of man. And now I face betrayal from old comrades at my home while I battle for the fate of our species! You see yourself as righteous. You are an irritation. Parochial. Your vision is too narrow to see the breadth of what the Emperor wants to achieve.'

'Justice has no half measures!' said Errin. 'If you style yourself as the bringer of justice, you cannot apply it as you will. You are either its unshakeable champion, or you are politician like all the other parasites sucking away the lives of the people you profess care for. There are a million worse places to be than Kiavahr. But that does not excuse the half job you did here. There are wounds here that run deep and will never heal. Best excise the damaged limb completely. If you do not, then one day there shall be a reckoning. The Mechanicum are jealous of the tech-guilds' secrets. The tech-guilds resent the Mechanicum. The Kiavahrans smart from their loss of power, and still the Lycaeans suffer.'

'Then they must suffer!' Corax said harshly. 'You do not understand. You cannot comprehend how complicated the reality of this is. For the time being, the situation here must remain as it is.'

'Corax, I do understand. I understand very well.' Errin's smile hardened. 'You were a free man once. You taught us to deny tyranny, and then you willingly submitted yourself to a tyrant. All those political theorists to teach you, and still you left them to this.'

'Vengeance has its place, but justice is everything,' said Corax. 'Even then, compromises must be made. The good of mankind is paramount.'

The man and the primarch stared at each other.

Errin shrugged. 'I have said what I needed to say. I have done what I needed to do. Kiavahr is destabilised. You will have to act.'

'I will not,' said Corax. 'The Mechanicum will resolve it. This is no concern

of mine. You wasted lives for nothing, Errin. You have wasted yourself.’

Corax gave him a last, long stare before he ducked out of the door.

‘You will kill me, I assume?’ said Errin after him.

‘I will,’ said Corax, pausing outside the cell. ‘For you have betrayed me personally, and that I cannot forgive. I show the tech-guilds mercy, I will show you mercy also. You will die quietly and quickly, and bring no further shame upon yourself.’

‘You are not worthy of my loyalty. You are consumed by violence, and given to fickleness. You mete out vengeance when you decide, and avoid justice where it counts.’

‘I do the Emperor’s bidding,’ said Corax. His black eyes widened fiercely. ‘Whatever that may be.’

‘One day!’ Errin began shouting. ‘One day you will see, Corvus Corax. You are wrong! You cannot stay in the shadows forever.’

‘That is for the Emperor to decide, Errin, not you,’ said Corax.

The cell door closed. For a moment Corax held still, listening to Errin’s protest. More pleas, more anger, more demands Corax return to his people. He rested his hand on the door.

‘One day I shall return,’ said Corax to himself. ‘I will come back here and make this place the perfect paradigm of human society. But that is far ahead, and there are many dark days to weather before then.’

Resolute, Corax vanished into the gloom of the Ravenspire.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Guy Haley is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Titandeath*, *Wolfsbane* and *Pharos*, the Primarchs novels *Corax: Lord of Shadows*, *Perturabo: The Hammer of Olympia*, and the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Dark Imperium*, *Dark Imperium: Plague War*, *The Devastation of Baal*, *Dante*, *Baneblade*, *Shadowsword*, *Valedor* and *Death of Integrity*. He has also written *Throneworld* and *The Beheading* for The Beast Arises series. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*, as well as the End Times novel *The Rise of the Horned Rat*. He has also written stories set in the Age of Sigmar, included in *War Storm*, *Ghal Maraz* and *Call of Archaon*. He lives in Yorkshire with his wife and son.

An extract from *Corax*.

He had not felt this way for a long time. Not in the decades since he had fought alongside the primarch to rid his home of its technocratic enslavers had Agapito been possessed of such vigour. It burned through him, giving him strength beyond his transhuman physique, every swing of his power sword energised by the purity of his cause.

Righteousness.

It was a hatred that boiled inside the Raven Guard commander, sending him without hesitation into the slaves of the accursed Word Bearers. Following Corax on the Emperor's Great Crusade had given Agapito purpose and determination, but the near-rage that propelled him into battle now was of an order far above duty and dedication.

It was fate that had delivered the hated foe into the hands of the Raven Guard. A chance encounter on the edge of the Cassik system – the Word Bearers caught with warp engine trouble and unable to flee. Agapito would not let the opportunity pass lightly.

This was providence, though from what higher power Agapito did not know, nor care. The slayers of his brothers would in turn be slain. The betrayal of Isstvan would be avenged, one traitor at a time if necessary. The memories of thousands of Raven Guard culled like vermin by the guns of the Word Bearers were like daggers in the commander's chest, their piercing a goad to drive him onwards.

He spied a traitor legionary amongst the crew that had spilled forth along the corridors to defend their strike cruiser against the boarding of the Raven Guard. The sight of the Word Bearer brought back a flood of recollection: cannons and las-fire scything across the Urgall Depression, leaving scores of dead sons of Deliverance with each salvo; the vox-net swamped by the cries of the dying and the shock of treachery; warriors he had fought alongside for many years ripped from the world of the living by cold-blooded murderers.

The half-human servitors and misshapen henchmen of the traitor legionary were no obstacle, easily thrown aside by Agapito's charge. In the confines of the strike cruiser the Raven Guard could not be matched. Agapito wreaked

bloody ruin with sword and fist, slashing and punching his way into the press of mutated foes without a moment's regard for the blades and mauls clattering from his armour.

Towering over the mass of freakish slaves, Agapito could see the Word Bearer as the traitor exhorted his minions to hurl themselves against the Raven Guard warriors. Dozens of slaves fell, their bodies rent with gruesome wounds, as Agapito and his legionaries thrust along the passage.

Breaking free from the throng, the commander paused, eyes fixed on his target as the red-armoured legionary waited a few metres away. The Word Bearer raised his chainsword to the grille of his helm, a mocking salute and a challenge to mortal combat.

Agapito was not here to duel, to exchange strike and parry in an effort to determine the worthy. He was here to avenge, to punish, to kill.

A blast from his plasma pistol seared through the armoured breast of the Word Bearer as he lowered his blade, turning ceramite and flesh to greasy slag. The Word Bearer toppled face-first to the deck as Agapito dashed onwards, carving into the sub-human creatures that served the Legion of Lorgar.

A few more seconds, a flurry of blows and shots, and Agapito was left standing over a mound of dead foes. A squad of his Talons – all survivors of Isstvan too – gathered around their leader.

'Quadrant clear, commander,' reported Sergeant Ashel. The legionary's armour was coated with blood, the black paint glistening with fresh gore. He looked down at the remains of the enemy. The corpses were of men and women twisted and mutated, with eyes and skin like snakes, and sharp teeth filling wide mouths. 'Vile filth.'

'Not so vile as those that lead them,' snarled Agapito.

He listened to the vox-net for a few seconds, picking out the interleaved reports and messages from other forces spreading out through the enemy strike cruiser. Squads Chovani and Kalain were encountering stiffer resistance than the others: more Word Bearers.

'We head to starboard,' the commander told his companions. 'Follow me.'

'The reactor chamber is aft, commander,' Ashel replied, staying where he was as Agapito took a step. 'The primarch's orders are–'

'The *enemy* are to starboard,' Agapito snapped. 'As are the escape shuttles. Do you wish them to elude their punishment? Have you forgotten Isstvan so quickly?'

Ashel glanced back at his squad for a moment, and shook his head.

'For Isstvan,' the sergeant said, lifting his bolter.

'For Isstvan,' Agapito replied.

Disgust welled up inside Corax as he pulled the blades of his lightning claw from the body of the crewman. The liquid that sprayed across the corridor was not human blood but a foul greenish fluid, fed through the slave from a brass cylinder riveted to his back. Many others, similarly altered, lay dead around him. At first Corax had thought the creatures mindless servitors, but the fear and desperation in their eyes had betrayed a spark of life not seen in the half-human creations of the Mechanicum. They were men and women with fully human faculties, modified and experimented upon by their Word Bearers masters.

The primarch's disgust was not for the pitiful figures that flung themselves into his path, but for the traitors that had created them. The followers of Lorgar had become wicked, inhuman things – a twisted parody of the honourable legionaries they had once been.

In the red light of the passageway his lightning claws gleamed. Crafted by his own hand on Deliverance after the victory at the Perfect Fortress, the weapons made him feel complete again. The Raven's Talons, his warriors called them – as much a symbol to the Legion of their determination to fight on despite their losses as they were weapons. Corax had forgone his flight pack in the close confines of the boarding action, but he felt as comfortable in the arched halls and winding corridors as he did the open skies.

He had been taught to fight in a place like this: a maze of ferrocrete and metal where every corner hid a potential foe. In the prison where he had been raised, endless passageways had become his hunting ground. He had never forgotten the lessons.

He did not head directly for the strategium but chose a less obvious path that would circumvent the strongest defences. The strike cruiser was like so many others in layout, with a central corridor running for most of the length of the ship; but Corax instead made his way along the gun decks, already ravaged by the broadsides of the *Avenger* as the battle-barge had closed for the boarding. In places the hull had been cracked wide, leaving the batteries open to the freezing void. The primarch, with a memorised schematic of the *Avenger*'s last pre-attack scan in mind, found routes around the breached sections, moving up and down through the decks to keep the defenders uncertain of the Raven Guard's route.

With him came a company from the *Avenger*, but for the moment the legionaries were little more than onlookers as the primarch carved his way towards the starship's strategium. It seemed the Word Bearers had thought it wiser to unleash their horde of mutated creations rather than face the ire of the primarch themselves.

They were not wrong.

Advancing swiftly, Corax encountered several dozen more slaves in the next gallery, armed with nothing more than wrenches, hammers and lengths of chain. Some had cybernetics grafted to them, others carried the artificial ichor-tanks he had already seen. All of them had pale skin slicked with the sweat of exertion and dread, their eyes red-rimmed and bloodshot. They did not shout any war cry as they ran at the primarch, and there was resignation, perhaps even relief, in their eyes as his lightning claws slashed left and right, hewing them down by the handful.

None of the crew-creatures survived long enough to strike Corax as he waded into their midst, his energy-sheathed fists turning metal to splinters and flesh to spatters. Glancing through the windows of the gallery he saw the *Avenger* holding course alongside the boarded ship, and beyond that the gleam of plasma engines from the *Triumph* and *Aeruginosis*, while further away still waited the rest of the Raven Guard flotilla.

Had they arrived two or three days later the Word Bearers might have continued on their way, to wreak whatever malevolence they intended. Good fortune for the Raven Guard had brought the enemy out of the warp just a few thousand kilometres from where the Legion had been mustering. Even before the bombardment by the Raven Guard, the traitor ship had shown signs of prolonged combat, damaged warp engines amongst its more obvious battle scars. Whatever had forced the strike cruiser to travel in such a state had to be important.

So it was that Corax sought to capture the vessel and learn its secrets, rather than destroy it out of hand.

Resistance grew stronger as the Raven Guard neared their objective. Securing the chambers and halls surrounding the strategium, the primarch and his warriors created a cordon clear of enemies. The rooms were strangely devoid of decoration. On the few occasions that Corax had spent time on Word Bearers ships before the Warmaster had turned, he had marvelled at the carvings and banners, icons and murals dedicated to the celebration of the Emperor and his deeds. What must have once been the officers' quarters were now empty shells, devoid of furnishing and embellishment, as though everything that once had lauded the Emperor had been expunged.

The strategium portals – two sets of huge double doors sealed by immense lockbolts – proved to be only a minor obstacle. Corax's lightning claws cut through one of the doors with a few blows, sending the reinforced plasteel tumbling into the darkened command chamber.

Corax was taken aback for a moment by the quiet. He had expected a hail of fire to greet his entry, and his charge onto the mezzanine overlooking the main floor of the bridge faltered as he met no resistance.

Glancing around the chamber, the primarch was confronted by clusters of interred servitors meshed with glowing consoles, their half-dead faces and withered limbs nearly white in the glow of the static that filled the main screen. Lights winked on and off in the gloom, the red and amber of failing systems, while exposed wiring buzzed and flickered. The chamber was filled with a faint smell of decay coming from the servitors; of flesh slowly going rank, mixed with oil and rust.

'Where are the Word Bearers?' asked Commander Soukhounou. As he had stormed into the strategium behind Corax, he too had come to a halt, confused by the absence of foes.

'Not here,' was the only answer Corax could give.

His gaze was drawn to a shape swaddled in bloodied robes, pierced by many pipes and cables, at the heart of the strategium. The figure's corpse-like thinness showed her human skeleton despite the profusion of implanted machinery. All that could be seen of her face was a slack mouth showing a few broken, yellowed teeth, the rest of her head encased in a many-faceted helm of ceramite into which passed dozens of coiled filaments.

Corax descended the steps to the main hall, his footsteps resounding across the quiet murmuring of the servitors and the buzz of poorly shielded circuits. To Corax's amazement, the woman stirred. She raised her head as though looking at him, a small black gem fixed to the brow of the enclosing helm.

'Release me,' she whispered. Blood-flecked saliva drooled from between cracked lips, a dark tongue lolling across raw gums. 'I can serve no more.'

'We are not your captors,' Corax told the woman as he stopped beside her. Now, closer, he saw the glint of silver thread in the tatters of her clothes. The patterns were broken, but taken together the remnants revealed the woman to be a Navigator. 'I am Corax, of the Raven Guard.'

'Corax…' She breathed the name and her lips twisted into a hideous smile. 'Grant me my death. You are the Lord of Deliverance and I need delivering from this torment.'

The primarch moved one of his energy-sheathed claws towards the Navigator, but he hesitated before granting her wish. It tore at his conscience, but a harder part of him – the part that had sent atomic charges into the cities of Kiavahr to kill thousands of innocents, and allowed him to pacify worlds resisting compliance – stayed his hand.

'Soon, I promise you, but first I have need of answers,' he told her. The Navigator slumped, causing the pipes and wires to rattle fiercely like the twitching of a grotesque puppet's strings.

Before Corax could begin his questioning he diverted his attention to the vox-net, distracted by an exchange between Branne and Agapito on the

command channel.

‘*We can’t break through here,*’ Branne was saying. ‘*You were supposed to flank the forces defending the reactor, brother.*’

‘*I will be with you shortly,*’ Agapito replied, breathing heavily. ‘*One of the bastards fled, the coward. We’ll have him cornered soon.*’

From long acquaintance Corax could sense Branne holding his temper in check, with some effort.

‘*Reactor readings are reaching critical,*’ the commander eventually responded. ‘*The reactor will reach meltdown if we do not seize control of it. We can deal with the Word Bearers once the ship is secure.*’

‘Agapito, what is causing your delay?’ the primarch demanded, irritated by the commander’s tardiness in completing his mission.

‘*I…*’ Agapito’s voice trailed away. When he spoke again a moment later, there was contrition in his voice. ‘*Apologies, Lord Corax. We will make all haste to the reactor chamber.*’

‘As you should have already, commander. We will speak of this later.’

‘*Yes, Lord Corax. Forgive my distraction.*’

‘If we are still alive in ten minutes, I will consider it,’ Corax replied. He knelt down next to the imprisoned Navigator and spoke gently. ‘I am sorry, but I must attend to another matter first. Be strong.’

He stood up and turned to Soukhounou.

‘See what you can do to slow the reactor overload from here,’ the primarch said, pointing to the engineering station where a rheumy-eyed servitor murmured a monologue of status reports. ‘I want this ship taken intact.’

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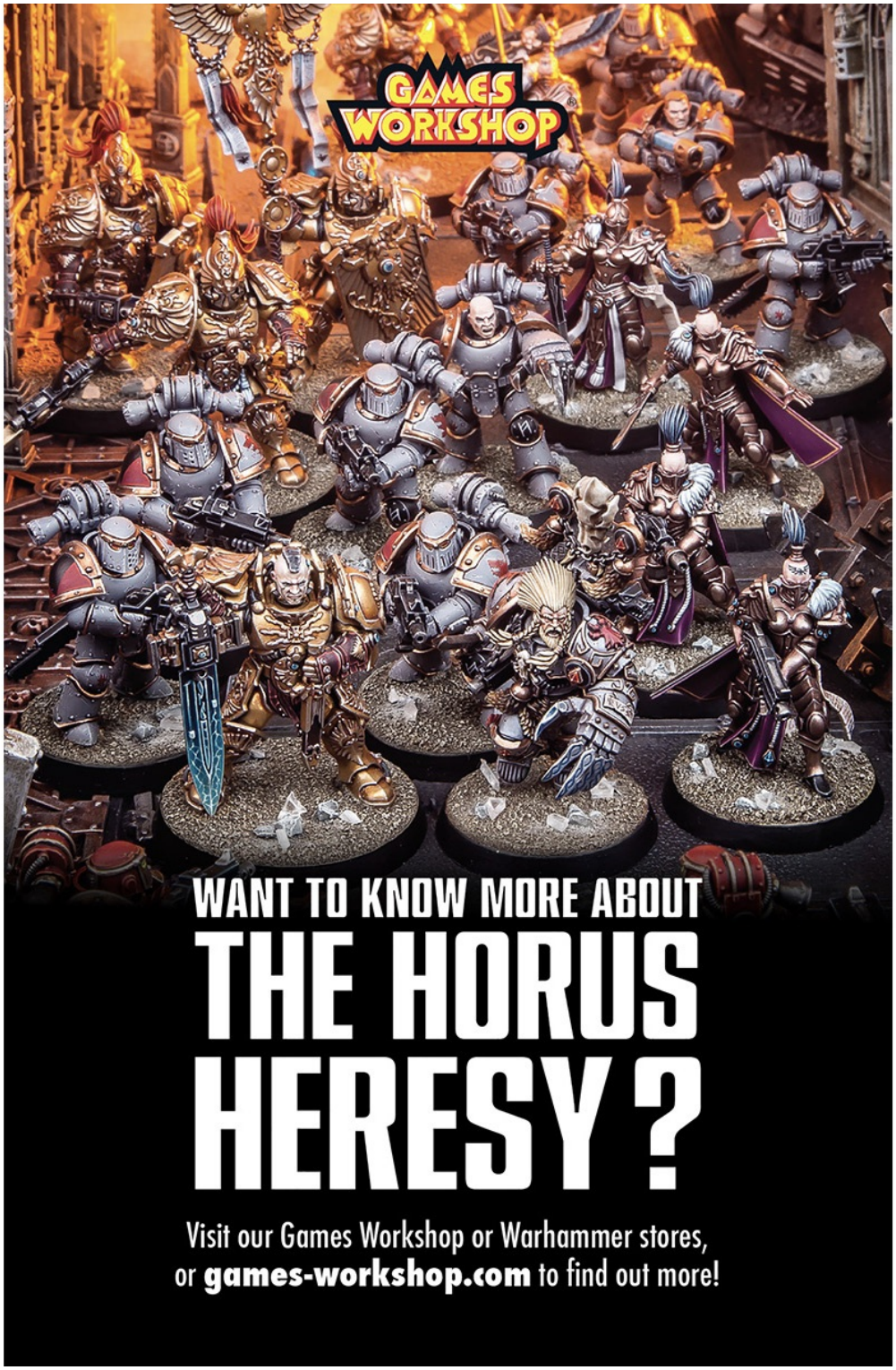
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* 9. If any part of this license is illegal, or becomes illegal as a result of any change in the law, then that part shall be deleted, and replaced with wording that is as close to the original meaning as possible without being illegal.

* 10. Any failure by Black Library to exercise its rights under this license for whatever reason shall not be in any way deemed to be a waiver of its rights, and in particular, Black Library reserves the right at all times to terminate this license in the event that you breach clause 2 or clause 3.